

MISS DYNAMITE

by

BERKELEY GRAY



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Norman Conquest Again!

WHEN NORMAN CONQUEST shared a poacher's meal in a quiet Suffolk field, even his razor-edged sixth sense could not have seen the sinister events which were to ensue from that casual meeting. From the murder of the unpleasantly efficient Sergeant Roper to the thrilling boodle-collecting finish, the Gay Desperado finds an opponent worthy of his steel in the lovely but unscrupulous Primrose Trevor. To him she is just a helpless girl in the power of a crooked father and badly in need of a knight-errant. But fortunately Joy Everard is there to checkmate this other feminine influence and finally saves her Man from extinction at the hand of her rival.



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CHAPTER ONE

THE TRAMP

TO A HEALTHY and hungry young man who had walked three miles from his disabled car the smell of cooking meat, mingled with the fragrance of wood smoke, was so arresting that Norman Conquest almost reeled. Over the hedge of the country lane he could see a flicker of friendly firelight and a lazy column of smoke.

With another sniff at the air he took firm, purposeful strides towards a rustic stile which broke the hedge a few yards farther along the lane. He had never before realized that the County of Suffolk could be so barren of villages and hamlets for miles at a stretch; and the roads so empty of traffic at a comparatively early hour of the evening that he could walk three miles without meeting anybody save an elderly rustic who had vaguely informed him that the village of Great Bardlow was "a bit farther along."

He had encountered the rustic, so it seemed to him, about ten miles back and he had as yet seen nothing of Great Bardlow. All he had seen was an apparently endless country lane, winding and twisting, with an occasional light twinkling somewhere in the distance.

Climbing the stile, he found himself in the sheltered corner of a triangular-shaped meadow. A dense little plantation shielded the spot from the keen night wind, and squatting near a cheerful fire was an individual of uncertain age. Undoubtedly a tramp. A few yards away stood an ancient and weather-beaten perambulator and, near it, a little tent was pitched.

"I don't know what you're cooking, brother, but it smells mighty good," remarked Norman Conquest, as he approached. "What's the betting I get invited to the feast?"

The tramp looked up at the lithe, immaculately clothed young man and briefly nodded.

"It's rabbit, sir," he said in a friendly voice. "As juicy and tender as young chicken. You're welcome to a bit if you're agreeable to sit with the likes of me."

Norman squatted down on a heap of brushwood and held his hands out to the welcome flames. The fire was small and cunningly made, so that it gave an intense heat in a minimum of space. Over it was propped an iron tripod, and from hooks at the top of this hung juicy looking slices of

meat, frizzling and spluttering in the most appetizing way.

The young man who was sometimes known as the Gay Desperado reluctantly tore his gaze away from the food and inspected his companion. The man was small and wiry, with little twinkling eyes and a whimsical-looking face with a permanent twist.

"Native of these parts?"

"Me, guv'nor? No."

"Any idea how far it is to Great Bardlow?"

"Just a mile along the road," said the tramp, with a jerk of his gnarled thumb. "I've been selling monkeys there today and did pretty well."

"So you sell monkeys?" said Norman Conquest politely. "Charming occupation. Do you catch them in the woods, or produce them by incubation?"

A grin crossed the sun-tanned and wind-hardened, leathery face of the tramp, causing it to crease up into a thousand tiny crinkles. He deftly unhitched a smoking slice of meat and laid it between two slabs of bread.

"I make 'em, guv'nor," he explained. "Like this."

With one hand he proffered the rough-and-ready sandwich to his unbidden guest, and with the other he took from a voluminous pocket a little toy. It was made of twigs, cunningly joined together by scraps of wire, and at the top sat a remarkable monkey in miniature. When the tramp moved a kind of lever, the little monkey bobbed up and down twice, and then turned a complete somersault, coming to rest again on its little perch. The bead eyes of the monkey twinkled wickedly in the firelight.

"That's a damned clever little gadget," said Norman Conquest admiringly, as he took a big bite out of the sandwich. "I'll buy it." He fished in his pocket and produced a pound note. "And cheap at the price."

"I sell 'em for sixpence, guv'nor. . . ."

"Did you invent the thing yourself?"

"Why, yes."

"Then you ought to be proprietor of your own business instead of tramping about the country," commented Norman. "Were you serious when you called this meat rabbit? I've never tasted anything so delicious in all my life."

"Maybe it's the way it's cooked, sir," said the tramp, holding the pound note hesitantly in his fingers. "What's the idea, guv'nor? You want some change, don't you?"

"In my opinion, this gadget is worth a quid, so put the money in your pocket and forget all about it," answered Norman. "Then you'd better get busy on the eats. I never did like feeding alone."

The man looked at the pound note again, almost as though he suspected its genuineness, and then tucked it into one of his many pockets.

"Well, it's rare kind of you, guv'nor," he said. "When you asked if you might join me in a bite, I didn't mean for you to pay so steeply. The little monkey's nothing. I make 'em as I go along the roads, between towns and villages. Twigs out of the hedges, a head or two, and odd bits of rabbit skin. I manage all right, sir. Always enough to buy myself bread and tea and such like."

"Been doing this sort of thing long?"

"Nigh on ten years, guv'nor—since the old woman died. There's not a corner of the country that hasn't seen me and my jumping monkeys." The tramp deftly made himself a sandwich and laughed with carefree happiness. "Proprietor of a business, eh?" he went on, recalling Norman Conquest's words. "Not me, guv'nor! I reckon I'd be stifled inside of a month. There's nothing to beat the open road, no matter whether it's summer or winter. As long as I make a few shillings a week, I'm happy."

And Norman Conquest believed him. Seldom, indeed, had the devil-may-care "1066" seen a more contented member of the human race. There was something very likable about the wiry little tramp.

"Another sandwich, guv'nor?"

"Bill, my friend, you're a thought reader," said Norman, as he pushed the last mouthful of his sandwich into its appointed home. "If I'm not robbing you of your own supper——"

"There's plenty for two, sir," said the tramp, as he prepared another sandwich. "And my name isn't Bill, begging your pardon, sir. It's Mandeville."

"Come again?"

"Yes, sir. Mandeville Livingstone," said the tramp, with a touch of pride in his voice. "Maybe you think I'm having you on, guv'nor——"

"Not at all, brother," interrupted the Desperado, his eyes twinkling. "Why shouldn't your name be Mandeville Livingstone? The most ordinary blokes sometimes have the funniest names. Take mine, for example. Norman Conquest. Sounds more like a battle than a name, doesn't it?"

They got on famously together. Norman was soon explaining that his big sports Hispano had developed ignition trouble in the middle of a vast wasteland, and he had been compelled to set out walking for the nearest village, hoping to find a garage. But he talked very little about himself and led the tramp on to take command of the conversation.

The fire was stoked up, and they sat by it and smoked. Norman Conquest did not particularly care whether he moved on now, or in an hour's time. He was rather enjoying himself. The tramp with the strange name of Mandeville Livingstone proved to be a simple-hearted fellow with a shrewd and happy philosophy. He was full of interesting yarns and anecdotes, and one of the things he said rather stuck in Norman's mind. He was talking about his little jumping monkey toys.

"I generally ask sixpence for 'em, guv'nor, but you can't be hard and fast," he said. "When I see a kiddy's ma hasn't got the money to pay, I sometimes let one go for twopence or even a penny."

"You sound as though you've got kiddies of your own."

"I had once, guv'nor—a little girl of five," said the tramp, his voice dropping and becoming a little husky. "Funny you should say that. The first monkey I ever made was for her. She and her mother both went together. That's when we were going round the fairs with a travelling puppet show. We happened to hit a town up north where there was a flu epidemic, and they were both gone inside ten days. Me, too, nearly. I couldn't work the puppets without the missus."

He fell silent and poked the fire with a stake of wood. And while Norman Conquest respected the tramp's thoughts by refraining from asking questions, they both heard a sudden slithering of heavy feet beyond the hedge. It was clear that somebody had just dismounted from a bicycle.

Norman glanced round. A thin, keen-faced, efficient-looking police sergeant was climbing over the stile.

"Come and warm your hands, Clarence," said Norman Conquest cordially. "Plenty of room beside the fire. It must be a cold job cycling about these blighted country roads."

The police officer gave him a surprised look and then turned his attention to the tramp.

"This your fire?" he asked bluntly.

"I made it, yes."

"I suppose you know you're trespassing?" went on the sergeant. "You'll have to move this tent and your other kelter and be getting on your way."

The man's attitude was unpleasant and officious. The charge of trespassing was paltry and his very interference was uncalled for. Norman Conquest, with one keen glance, sized the sergeant up. He was a youngish man, devoid of all sense of humour, and he probably nursed a secret grudge against the authorities for keeping him in a rural district instead of giving him a chance to exercise his massive brain power in a big community. Such officers are always apt to

go about looking for petty offenders. They can't wink at anything because their eyelids are not made that way.

"Come, come, Clarence," said Norman banteringly. "Cut out the starch and unbend. Squat down and have one of my cigarettes. You're all wrong about Mandeville Livingstone. He's a charming fellow. As for trespassing——"

"I don't know who you are, sir, but I'll trouble you to mind your own business," interrupted the sergeant curtly. "Maybe you're the owner of that big car I saw along the road?"

"Why, my dear Holmes, this is marvellous!" said Norman, in amazement. "Such brilliant powers of deduction stagger me. You're quite right. I am the owner of that big car."

"Then I'll trouble you for your name and address, sir!"

"Have I been trespassing, too?"

"You left your car without lights."

"Is it my fault if the electrical thingummyjig lets me down?" retorted Norman. "Besides, I took jolly good care to leave the car on the grass verge, so you can't trot out any obstruction charge."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but the off-side wheels of your car are six inches off the grass verge and standing fully on the highway," said the sergeant. "I took very careful measurements and——"

"Well, well!" interrupted Norman drawlingly. "What a disgustingly unpleasant bloke you are, Clarence! I've come across a few blighting coppers in my time, but you're the limit. So you actually whipped out your tape measure and took the deadly evidence! One of these days when they're in an absent-minded mood, they'll make you an inspector!"

The man flushed angrily.

"I'll trouble you, sir," he repeated, "for your name and address."

"That's just where you're wrong," said Norman blithely. "You can go to hell for my name and address. And what, my friend, are you going to do about it?"

Obviously, the sergeant could do nothing, and he knew it. Barring his official report, which might ultimately result in a small fine for Norman, he was helpless. So he vented his spleen on the tramp.

"You heard what I said a minute ago!" he snapped. "Get your stuff out of this meadow and be moving. We've had enough of your sort in this district!" His eyes suddenly lit up as he caught sight of a raw and bloody-looking rabbit skin in the grass. "Poaching, eh?" he barked triumphantly. "You're under arrest!"

Mandeville Livingstone sprang up like a jack-in-the-box

and Norman Conquest grinned. The little man was looking rather like an angry ferret.

"You can't arrest me," he said hotly. "I've got a clean record, I have. I've never poached anything. What's more, I'm going to stay right where I am. This meadow belongs to a farmer named Burns, and he told me I could camp here and he gave me permission to have as many rabbits as I liked!"

The statement was so patently true, and it so completely robbed the sergeant of his case that he drew back with a scowl.

"I'll see Mr. Burns right away, and if I find you've been lying, I'll lock you up," he threatened.

He was moving away in disorder when his foot touched against the little monkey toy which Norman Conquest had bought and had laid in the grass. The sergeant's foot came down on the toy with a savage crunch, smashing it to fragments.

"Here, you can't do that!" shouted the tramp, running forward and pushing the police officer violently aside. "I've just sold the toy to this gentleman——"

He broke off for the sergeant, with an unpleasant smile of satisfaction, was snapping handcuffs over his wrist. The little tramp's eyes were round with consternation.

"You're charged with assaulting a police officer," said the sergeant grimly.

"But I didn't do nothing!" panted the tramp. "I never touched you!"

Norman Conquest wondered what he should do. His inclination was to bean this police pest on the spot, but he had no desire to get into trouble over such a trivial incident. At the same time, there was no doubt that the harmless little tramp was "for it." A man of his standing would have no chance whatever against the word of a police sergeant before a bench of magistrates.

"Now, look here," began Norman, and then he stopped.

A terrier had wormed its way through the stile and was barking furiously. But Norman Conquest was not looking at the terrier. A girl was standing on the step of the stile, the flickering firelight illuminating her trim figure, her sweet face, and her mass of wavy blonde hair.

"What has the poor man done, Sergeant Roper?" asked the girl, and her soft and melodious voice was a perfect match for her thoroughbred appearance.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MURDER

SERGEANT ROPER looked at the girl with an air of unmistakable deference.

"It's all right, Miss Trevor," he said. "Only a bit of trouble with this tramp——"

"It would be more correct to say, Miss Trevor, that the bit of trouble was with me," broke in Norman Conquest smoothly. "I'm afraid I annoyed the sergeant by calling him names, and we all lost our tempers."

The girl had come forward into the meadow, and Norman had casually placed a few dry sticks on the fire in order to increase the blaze. He could see her much better now. Her fair beauty was something to marvel at and her large eyes, as blue as Mediterranean pools, were wide open with girlish sympathy as she beheld the luckless tramp.

"This man assaulted me, miss," said the sergeant gruffly.

"Oh come, Mr. Roper!" The girl's eyes suddenly twinkled, and Norman could see that she possessed a quick sense of humour. "A great big, strong man like you! Why, he couldn't hurt you if he tried! I'm sure you're not going to arrest him."

"Well, I've got to do my duty." The sergeant, under the spell of her fragrant personality, was already beginning to wilt. "If I let him go this time——"

"I know you'll let him go—just for my sake," smiled the girl, turning her big eyes upon him like a battery of search-lights. "You're much too big and important to do anything petty. I've always had such a high opinion of you, Sergeant."

The gratified Roper unlocked the handcuffs and gave Mandeville Livingstone a hard and severe look.

"You've got to thank this young lady here for this," he said sternly. "But remember this, my man. If you're not out of this district by tomorrow I'll run you in." He turned. "Don't you be deceived by his looks, miss. I know his sort. He's just a wandering tramp, and there's been funny things going on in this district lately."

"Funny things?" The girl's voice was full of wonder. "In a quiet, rural place like Bardlow? Whatever do you mean, Mr. Roper?"

"Maybe I don't mean anything, miss," said the sergeant mysteriously. "All I know is that I've got eyes—and ears



too. And I'm not too friendly towards any strangers." He gave Norman Conquest a significant look. "I'd like to know what you're doing, sir, making free with tramps!"

"I dislike the way you keep referring to my friend, Mr. Livingstone, as a tramp," said Norman severely. "Mr. Livingstone is an artist. Artists are notoriously eccentric. If Mr. Livingstone prefers to sleep in a tent and eat smoky slices of rabbit, who are we to criticize? I've never tasted smoky rabbit before and I can give you my word it is a hot number."

"You make me feel quite hungry!" said the girl, laughing.

Her frank friendliness gave Norman a big kick. He had never met a girl like her. She was so fresh and open; such a part of the fair countryside. Innocence in a young girl was a quality Norman had never actually discovered. He had thought it non-existent—until now. The way she turned her eyes on him and inspected him with almost childlike curiosity was simply devastating.

"I'm learning all sorts of things this evening," said Norman smilingly. "I'm finding out that it's a good thing, now and again, to get in touch with real people—people of the open spaces. I feel as though I've had half-a-dozen tonics."

"Are you staying in the district?" she inquired, with naive simplicity.

"Why, yes, Miss Trevor; I'm in very comfortable rooms at the Red Lion in Great Bardlow." Norman Conquest spoke with unblushing glibness. "Norman is the name. I've been doing a lot of brain work lately, and a week in the heart of the country is a fine rest cure."

"Brain work?" The girl looked at him with interest. "Oh, you don't mean to say that you write books?"

"Not really," said Norman modestly. "Just thrillers, you know."

Why on earth he was telling these fairy tales he could not for the life of him understand. He had no desire at all to deceive the girl. Until five minutes ago he had had no desire at all to stay at the Red Lion in Great Bardlow. He knew that he was perfectly safe in mentioning the Red Lion, as he had never yet encountered an English village without a hostelry of that name.

She gave him another friendly smile and a nod and made chirruping noises to her terrier, and off they went. It was not until she had disappeared over the stile that Norman Conquest came out from under the influence.

"Did you notice the grace as she crossed that stile. Sergeant?" he murmured, feeling friendly even towards Roper.

"By Jove, a real thoroughbred, if ever I saw one!"

"She's all that, sir," agreed the sergeant, giving him a cold look. "She's the daughter of Sir Hastings Trevor, of the Hall—and it's no good you ever thinking you're likely to meet her again. If I hadn't been here, she wouldn't have spoken to you; she's not the sort that makes free with strangers."

"What exactly, you mean by 'making free,' I can only imagine," said Norman. "But if your mind is anything like I think it is, it's something pretty foul. And you're wrong, Clarence. I regard Miss Trevor as a fragrant flower——"

But Sergeant Roper, with a grunt of impatience, was on his way back to his bicycle. He did not appreciate Norman's flippancy. And the Desperado turned with a grin to his friend, the tramp.

"Well, now that Beauty and the Beast have gone on their way, I suppose I might as well be shifting too," he said. "You don't happen to know in which direction the Hall lies, I suppose? No, you wouldn't. Let it go."

The crinkly faced tramp's eyes were twinkling.

"She is a rare pretty piece, sir," he agreed. "She must have a kind nature, too, or she wouldn't have stood up for me like she did." The twinkle died out of his eyes and was replaced by a look of hot resentment. "As for that sergeant, the loud-mouthed bully, he'd better not interfere with me again!"

Norman looked thoughtful.

"Take a tip from me, Mandeville," he said shrewdly. "Shift your camp to some other spot—tonight. I've met pests of Roper's breed before, and the next time he comes round on his beat he might pick another quarrel with you—and you won't have anybody to stand up for you next time."

"Ay, maybe you're right," said the other, with quick understanding. "Thanks for the tip, gov'nor. Not as I've got any thing to run away for," he added quickly. "I've never done any poaching——"

"Mandeville!"

"Well, not real poaching, sir," amended the tramp apologetically. "Catching a rabbit for supper isn't breaking the law. Anybody can tell you that there's a lot too many rabbits about."

Norman Conquest chuckled as he said good night and went on his way. He felt all the better for his hour in the genial and refreshing company of that whimsical knight of the road. He was almost sorry, in fact, to part company with the man.

It was only a mile to Great Bardlow, as he soon discovered. The village proved to be quite extensive—a long, straggling place with a very wide main street, containing a bewildering

assortment of taverns. Luckily, the Red Lion proved to be one of the best of the bunch: a comfortable old-time inn with a half-timbered front and mullioned windows.

Norman knew perfectly well that he was acting like an absolute fool; but he went straight into the Red Lion and booked a sitting room and a bedroom, and paid a week's rent in advance. The chances were he would drive on to London as soon as his car was ready. He had left Joy Everard, his charming little partner, with her two aunts in Clacton; and, in fact, he had been on a leisurely roundabout cruise to London when his car had played tricks with him.

But he wasn't thinking of "young Pixie"—as he always thought of Joy—at this moment. He could see nothing but a refreshingly innocent face and two big blue eyes. In a tranquil frame of mind he partook of a drink, gave instructions to the landlord to have his car fetched in, and then went to bed.

* * *

It was a few minutes before midnight when Sir Hastings Trevor approached Bardlow Hall in his big car. The wealthy landowner had been dining with some friends in a neighbouring town and he was alone in the car except for Briggs, his chauffeur. He was dozing, in fact, for he had indulged rather freely in his friends' port during the evening; and he was awakened with a jolt as the big limousine came to an abrupt stop, the wheels shrieking on the macadam as the chauffeur trod hard on the brakes.

"Damnation!" swore Sir Hastings, awakening with a start. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Briggs? Haven't I told you——!"

"There's—there's something in the road, sir," ejaculated the chauffeur in a scared voice. "I only just pulled up in time. Looks as though there's been an accident."

He was out of the car by this time and standing shakily over something which lay fully revealed in the glare of the big headlamps. Cursing freely, Sir Hastings opened his own door and alighted heavily on the road.

"Good God, Briggs, you're as white as a sheet!" he said, in a startled voice. "What on earth . . . Oh!"

He stood stock-still. What he saw was not pleasant. The car lights were rather too bright. On the road was stretched the body of a police officer, his legs in an untidy tangle, his arms flung outwards—and the back of his head a mere pulp, with blood lying in pools on either side of his hidden face. It was, indeed, a ghastly sight.

"He must have been hit by a lorry, or something," whispered the chauffeur, in a frightened voice. "I can't look at

it, sir! I'm all faint. . . ."

He turned aside, clinging to the car for support. Sir Hastings Trevor was made of sterner stuff. He bent down more closely, but took care not to approach too near.

"This injury wasn't caused by any motor vehicle, Briggs," he said grimly. "Look at these marks and scratches on the road. Signs of a struggle, if I'm any judge. And the wound is peppered with fragments of wood bark. It's murder!"

He grasped the dead man's arm and half lifted the body.

"It's Sergeant Roper, sir!" gasped Briggs, who took a look at that moment.

"I thought as much—I thought I recognized the shape of his back," said the landowner quietly. "I dare say I ought not to have touched the body at all. Drive as fast as you can to the Hall and telephone to the police in Studbury. Tell them what's happened and try to be lucid. If Miss Primrose is still up, don't tell her anything about this—— But there's not a chance she'll be up. Hurry away, Briggs."

"But you, Sir Hastings? You're not going to stay here . . . with . . . with . . ."

"With—with—with! Stop stammering, you fool!" snapped Sir Hastings. "Somebody's got to stay here. We can't leave the body lying unguarded in the middle of the road—and we mustn't move it either. Be off with you."

Briggs climbed into his driving seat and his progress was somewhat erratic as he drove up the road. His master moved some yards away from that gruesome thing on the ground and lit a cigar. His hand was as steady as a rock and the match flame did not even flicker. The little glow revealed a curiously satisfied expression on Sir Hastings Trevor's face.

He strolled about, calm and even placid. Within ten minutes, Briggs was back. He was steadier now, and his breath smelled of strong spirits. Evidently he had seized the opportunity to have a couple of quick ones.

"I spoke to Inspector Marshall, sir," he reported: "The inspector was just going home and he had his car right outside the Studbury police station. He said he'd come right over."

"That means he ought to be here within a few minutes," said the landowner. "You'd better leave the car where she is, Briggs. The lights don't show up the poor fellow too clearly. If you'd rather not stay, you can walk to the Hall. . . . No, you'd better not. The inspector might want to question you."

Within five minutes the lights of a car came gleaming and snaking along the twisty road, and when the smart saloon came to a standstill it emitted a portly rural inspector and a

constable. Very few words were necessary. Mr. Marshall went across to the body, looked at it, and then shook his head.

"Horrible!" he said, visibly shaking. "God! I've seen a few ghastly sights—— Yes, he's Roper, right enough. Somebody must have jumped at him from behind——" He broke off, bending down and flashing a powerful electric torch. "Anyhow, the poor chap knew nothing about it, sir."

"See those scraps of wood bark entangled in the matted hair? A wooden stake was used, I imagine—probably a piece of half-dead timber torn out of a hedge."

"That's an interesting point, sir," said Inspector Marshall. "If the timber hadn't been half dead, the bark wouldn't have fallen away. The doctor will tell us more when he comes. . . . I left instructions in Studbury that he was to follow as quickly as possible. An ambulance, too. I understand that it was you who first saw the body, sir?"

"Briggs saw it first—my chauffeur," said Sir Hastings Trevor. "I was dozing, in fact."

He briefly explained how the body had been discovered, and the inspector again bent down and made a tentative and half-hearted examination.

"He hasn't been dead an hour," he muttered. "Diligent and efficient chap, Roper. Too efficient, perhaps. I've never had a man under me who so got on my nerves. Always complaining about the dullness of the routine."

He took hold of the body and heaved it over on its side, fully exposing the face. The dead sergeant's eyes were wide open, and he seemed to wear an expression of shocked surprise. Death must have come to him very suddenly.

"Hallo!" said the inspector. "What's this?"

Lying on the ground, revealed by the shifting of the body, was a little scrap of fluffy fur. Both men bent down curiously, and Inspector Marshall picked up the object.

"Rabbit skin," he commented. "Funny—— Why, it's fashioned into the shape of a tiny monkey!"

CHAPTER THREE

THE SCENT OF BATTLE

THE FIND was so extraordinary that the inspector was completely nonplussed. He was not a very imaginative man. He was elderly, stoutish, and his promotion had come in the natural order of things, and not because he possessed any brilliance.

"This ought to be a valuable clue, sir," he said heavily. "It must have been left by the murderer. I can't imagine Roper playing about with a child's trifle of this sort. What do you make of it, sir?"

"It might mean anything—or it might mean nothing," replied Sir Hastings, with a shrug. "I don't know much about Roper, but I've heard that he was very unpopular. It seems to be just a commonplace, sordid crime. Roper probably met a tramp or a poacher on the road and tried to arrest him."

"That's what you get for being conscientious," grunted the inspector. "There'll be a rare to-do over this business, sir! Wait until the Chief Constable hears about it!"

"I'm sorry, Inspector, but I don't propose to do anything of the sort," said Sir Hastings dryly. "You don't want me any more, I take it?"

"Why, no, sir. Thanks for your help, sir."

The inspector saluted and Sir Hastings Trevor got into his car and drove to Bardlow Hall. There was a calm, satisfied expression on his face as the big automobile wound its way up the beautifully kept drive, with its borders of narcissi and daffodils and crocuses. Sir Hastings was met by a calm, dignified butler in the spacious lounge hall.

"Quite a bit of excitement this evening, Dawes," commented Sir Hastings, as the man assisted him out of his overcoat and took his hat and scarf.

"Yes, sir. I've heard talk of it."

"Is Mr. Sangley anywhere about?"

"He came in a short time ago, sir," said Dawes. "I think he has gone to his own study."

"Ask him to join me in the library."

"Very good, sir."

Sir Hastings straightened his well-cut evening jacket, walked into the handsome library, and poured a very large brandy and soda. Then he sat down at his desk and relaxed. There came a discreet tap at the door, and a bent, bespectacled, scholarly-looking man entered.

"Sit down, Sangley," said the landowner, with a wave of his hand towards an easy chair beside the desk. "I want to compliment you on your performance. Very few private secretaries could have done so well."

"I don't think I muddled anything, sir," said Sangley, in an apologetic voice. "But it was rather a rush job, and in some ways I was quite lucky."

Sir Hastings flicked his automatic lighter and held the little flame to a cigar.

"Yes," he went on, between puffs, "you made a very ex-

cellent job of Roper's head, Sangley. One blow, I take it? You've got more strength than one would imagine."

A twisted little grin appeared on the scholarly man's thin lips.

"It's not so much strength, sir, as knack," he murmured. "I happened to get in a direct blow, and the wooden club I used was very strong and heavy."

"You wore gloves, of course?"

"Oh, come, sir!" protested Sangley.

"I apologize, Sangley; it was a foolish question," said Sir Hastings. "A man of your experience would naturally wear gloves. You timed your action cleverly. There was very little chance that any other motorist would be the first to find the body."

"Don't you think it would have been safer, sir, if you *had* left some other motorist to find it?"

"Not at all. We, at the Hall, are quite above suspicion, and it was the most natural thing in the world for me to discover Roper on my way home from the Carstons'," said Sir Hastings Trevor. "In a thing like this, Sangley, we can't take any chances—and, although you may not like it, I was not prepared to trust even your efficiency. It was vital, therefore, that I should be the first to see the body, if only to make sure that Roper was completely dead."

"I'm rather uncomfortable about Briggs, sir."

"Then, don't be. Briggs is not one of us, I know—but that is all to the good," said the landowner. "The man is very much of a fool and his reactions were satisfactorily genuine. The police will question him, rather than me, and his answers will necessarily be natural. I can easily give him notice at the end of the month when the unfortunate affair has blown over."

"I was about to make the same suggestion, sir."

The bearing of these two men remained that of employer and private secretary, even in the close intimacy of this very compromising conversation; even though the walls and windows and doors of the library were utterly soundproof.

Sir Hastings yawned, rose to his feet, and took out his wallet.

"Well, Sangley, I'm going to bed. Best place for you, too. There's no earthly reason why we should alter our usual routine."

He withdrew a number of notes from his wallet—ten tens—and dropped them carelessly on the desk.

"For me, sir?" said Sangley eagerly.

"Yes; regard it as a little bonus," said Sir Hastings. "There may be more later. We're damned lucky to have

got rid of Roper so easily. The man was becoming more than a pest; his activities, of late, have been positively worrying. You carried out the rest of your instructions, of course?"

"In every detail, sir."

"No hitch?"

"Without boasting, sir," said Sangley modestly, "I can safely say that when I undertake a job, there are never any hitches."

* * *

Norman Conquest slept badly. There was no ostensible reason for this, as he was an exceedingly fit young animal, and the bed at the Red Lion was extraordinarily comfortable and well aired.

He was not the kind of man, either, to sleep fitfully because he was in a strange bed. Norman could sleep anywhere, as a rule. In his various wanderings about the world he had sometimes been obliged to sleep in spots which would have given the average man rheumatoid arthritis with complications of such an alarming nature that even doctors are apt to talk of them in awed whispers.

His sleeplessness was not due to the blue eyes which occasionally drifted across his vision. Norman Conquest regarded himself as blue-eye-proof.

He repeatedly told himself that he was acting like a perfect fool. There was no earthly reason why he should have stayed the night in Great Bardlow. The electrical trouble which his Hispano had developed could probably have been put right by an efficient mechanic in half an hour. He could have done it himself, only he had not been in the mood.

No, there was something else. . . .

Norman could not explain it—he had not been able to explain it on other occasions—but there seemed to be a zephyring whisper of danger in the very air. Which, on the face of it, was absurd. No sleepier spot than Great Bardlow could be found in the whole United Kingdom. And yet . . . When Norman Conquest's nostrils twitched and sniffed the air he could almost catch the scent of coming battle. He felt that he could hear the drumming of distant strife.

Idiotic—fantastic—in fact, fat-headed. The silence of Great Bardlow was of that tranquil, peaceful quality which is so characteristic of sleepy English villages. An occasional bark of a distant dog, the mournful cry of a discontented owl, and the twitter of swallows making themselves more comfortable in bed were the only disturbances—with the possible exception of a far-off cock, who kept making the absurd mistake that dawn had come.

"Hell!" said Norman Conquest, rolling over in bed for the twentieth time.

Finding that sleep was impossible, he resolved to get up and smoke a cigarette. Ten seconds later he was asleep. Such is the perversity of human nature. But less than a couple of minutes later he was awakened—or so it seemed to him. He did not trouble to look at his watch, but if he had done so he would have found that two hours had passed and the time was nearly 2 a.m. The far-off cock, now becoming somewhat hoarse, was still announcing the dawn.

There were other sounds. The tramping of heavy feet on the hard macadam of Bardlow High Street. An occasional muttering of gruff voices.

Norman got out of bed, went to the quaint old window, and looked out. It was very dark, and not a light was gleaming from any window up and down that straggling village street. Some men were walking along in the middle of the road, and in spite of the intense gloom Norman recognized the shapes of a peaked-capped inspector and a helmeted constable. Between them was another man, very much smaller. They passed the Red Lion without a word, and the echo of their feet died away.

Norman Conquest shrugged. Probably some local drunk. He yawned and went to bed again. That premonition of gathering storm clouds still sent little tingles up and down his spine and formed effervescent bubbles in his blood, but he took less heed now, for he was feeling serenely sleepy. And, in fact, after he had got back into bed, he did not awaken until the sun was shining with springlike friendliness through the chintz curtains of his window.

"Morning, and the return of common sense to her throne," Norman told himself, as he made for the one bathroom which the hotel boasted. "A spot of breakfast, a friendly word with mine host, and I'll be on my way to London inside an hour."

But twice during his bath he had visions of a friendly, crinkly, twisted face—and no less than six times he had visions of a fair and sweet face, complete with happy blue eyes. Common sense, apparently, was making a detour.

Norman dressed and went downstairs. In the picturesque, stone-flagged hall of the inn he encountered the rudly-faced landlord, and mine host had an uncommonly serious expression on his face which, overnight, had been all smiles. He took a look at the immaculate, perfectly groomed figure of his young guest and spoke as follows:

"This is a rare bad business, sir."

"Don't tell me you've run out of ham and eggs?" asked

Norman, with concern. "I know, from experience, that there's never anything else on the menu at a country inn, and your Bardlow air has given me an appetite which must be seen to be believed."

"But of course, sir, I was forgetting; you've only just come down," said the landlord. "You haven't heard?"

"Heard what, Boniface?"

"Why, about the murder."

"Don't tell me you have murders in this neck of the woods?"

"There aren't many as had a good word for Sergeant Roper, being as he was what you might call such a nosey-parker, sir, but nobody wanted to see him murdered," continued mine host, with a grave shake of his head. "It's a good thing for Bardlow that it wasn't done by anybody local. It's time they did something to clear these tramps off the roads. Riff-raff, I call them, sir."

Something seemed to prick under Norman Conquest's skin, but his bearing was as cool and self-possessed as ever. That danger signal had not been fooling. Some immutable prank of fate had prompted him to stay the night in Great Bardlow, and the fun and frolics were hovering about in the offing.

"Tell me more," drawled Norman, when he and Mr. Reeves, the landlord, reached the privacy of the little coffee room. "Sergeant Roper is about the only man, other than yourself, I have met in this backwater. I had a short chat with him last night, as a matter of fact, about my stranded car."

"Well, you won't have no more chats with him, sir," said the landlord, with a shake of his head. "He's dead—with the back of his skull crushed in like an eggshell. Sir Hastings found him on the road at about midnight. It must have been a big shock for the squire, I reckon."

Norman lazily placed a cigarette in his mouth.

"Without wishing to speak ill of the dead, I must say that the Roper pestilence struck me as being one of nature's major mistakes," he observed. "In fact, I've seldom come across a bloke who so palpably went about asking people to bash him on the back of the head. And who did this worthy deed?"

"Why, that tramp, sir—that feller who was selling his monkey toys in the village yesterday——"

"Oh, yes?" said Norman softly.

He didn't believe it. He had spent an hour in the company of the whimsical Mandeville Livingstone, and a more harmless little man he had never met. The tramp could no

more have killed Roper than he could have whipped a child. It wasn't in him. His rough exterior concealed—and only very lightly concealed—one of nature's true gentlemen.

"They arrested him in the middle of the night, sir," said the landlord, "and they've got him down at the lock-up now. Silly thing, I reckon, to keep him in Great Bardlow. Folks are likely to get pretty excited when the news gets all round."

Norman remembered the three figures he had seen in the darkness, and he knew now—that the little man between the inspector and the constable had been his friend, the tramp.

"I don't think Roper was so popular that the villagers are likely to raid the cop shop and do a spot of lynching," said Norman dryly. "And why do the master minds of the local police jump to the conclusion that this tramp did Roper such a piece of no good? I'll bet there are plenty of other people with stronger reasons——"

"Ay, maybe, sir, but there's the evidence," interrupted the landlord. "Inspector Marshall was first put on the track of the tramp because he found one of them little monkey toys under the body. It must have fallen out of the man's pocket during the struggle."

"So they struggled, did they?"

"Seems like it, sir. There's marks on the road."

"Anything else?"

"Why, it's as clear as daylight, as you might say. When the inspector and Bill Siggins—he's the constable—went to the tramp's tent, they found him fast asleep, with blood on his clothes. And, as if that wasn't enough, there was the death weapon hidden in a ditch, ten yards away. A great bludgeon of wood, with blood all over the end of it—ay, and some of Roper's hair, and worse!"

Norman Conquest, without considering the evidence for a fractional second, dismissed it as unworthy of notice. He just didn't believe it. It was so full of flaws that his opinion of the landlord's intelligence, never very high, fell to several degrees below zero. For Mr. Reeves obviously did believe the evidence.

And, as Norman did not believe in wasting time on a man whose intelligence was of the arctic variety, he dismissed the subject and made a request that serfs should wait upon his appetite. And, during breakfast, Norman thought a great deal. He thought so much, in fact, that as soon as the meal was finished he strolled out into the sunshine, walked down the village street, and took lithe strides into the little police station.

Inspector Marshall was in the office when he entered, and the inspector was talking to somebody on the telephone.

"Very good, miss," he was saying. "Thank you very much, miss. Much obliged, I'm sure, for your help."

He hung up and looked across at Norman Conquest, who had pushed a letter basket and a pile of loose papers aside and had seated himself on a corner of the inspector's desk.

"Look here, sir, you can't do that!"

"Can't do what?"

"Sit on my desk like that!"

"Don't be silly; I'm doing it," said Norman, lighting a smoke. "I understand that you've got a prisoner here, tucked away in the dankest cell. A man named Mandeville Livingstone, charged with murdering Sergeant Roper?"

The inspector, very red in the face, had half risen to his feet. The cool effrontery of this well-dressed young stranger, who forced his way into the office and sat on desks, had stirred some deep inner emotion. Mr. Marshall was a stolid, rule-of-thumb police officer, and strangers never sat on his desk. It was an unheard-of liberty.

"That's true, but——"

"Fine!" said Norman crisply. "Show me to the prisoner; I want to see him."

"You want to see him!" echoed Inspector Marshall thickly. "Look here, young man, if you think you can come into my office and virtually take charge of it——"

"That, in fact, sums it up in a nutshell," drawled Norman Conquest imperturbably. "Careless of me to neglect the introductions. Marshall, I think, is your name—but I've the advantage of you. A trifle we'll soon set in order."

He took a white card from his pocket and tossed it carelessly on the blotting pad in front of the inspector. Mr. Marshall picked it up and then stiffened. For the name he read on the card was—"William Williams, Chief Inspector, C.I.D., New Scotland Yard."

CHAPTER FOUR

NORMAN CONQUEST TAKES CHARGE

IT WAS sheer mischievous devilry which had prompted Norman Conquest to practise the little deception. Not that he carried Chief Inspector Williams' card on him by mere chance. He had other cards also—bearing various important names. Norman believed in being prepared for all emergencies.

The effect upon Mr. Marshall was marked—and, indeed, somewhat painful. The unfortunate man struggled to his feet and saluted. In all his years of service at Studbury—for he

was only on duty at the Great Bardlow police station until Roper's successor could be appointed—he had never had a visit from one of the Big Men of Scotland Yard. And, frankly, Norman Conquest was not his conception of a Big Man.

"Sorry, sir; I didn't imagine the Chief Constable would seek the help of the Yard," he said, in a flustered voice. "Yes, sir; we've got the man here."

"Good!" Norman waved an airy hand. "I dare say you expected to see a much older man, eh? Believe it or not, Inspector, it's a tricky business, in these days of the police college, to spot a Yard man! Well, move over and we'll get down to business."

With the utmost *sang-froid* he elbowed Inspector Marshall out of the way and seated himself in Mr. Marshall's chair. Mr. Marshall was obliged to sit down on a hard form.

"I'm not entirely satisfied with the evidence," continued Norman. "Roper was found, I understand, with the back of his head smashed in; under the body was a little toy monkey, and this led you to suspect an itinerant hawker, who had been selling the things in the village yesterday. You found the man asleep, and there were blood-stains on his clothes; you also found the weapon, a heavy bludgeon, in a ditch nearby."

The Inspector was impressed by his visitor's complete knowledge of the case.

"Yes, sir, it's a perfectly straightforward business," he said. "Naturally, the fellow protested his innocence—but they all do. I'm rather surprised that the Yard should have thought it necessary to send you down, sir."

"There's more in this case than you think, Marshall," said Norman, with a mysterious wag of his head. "Has the prisoner made any statement?"

"Yes, sir; he told a rambling story of a young man who shared his supper last evening," replied the inspector. "It seems that Roper had an altercation with this young man and then smashed one of the prisoner's toys. Livingstone sprang at Roper and Roper arrested him. Then Miss Trevor of the Hall happened to appear on the scene, and she persuaded the sergeant to let the man go. I've seen Miss Trevor this morning and she has corroborated the story; she says that Roper undoubtedly quarrelled with the man."

"And she believes that the tramp killed him?" asked Norman incredulously.

"As a matter of fact, sir, she got very angry and called me a muddling old woman," said the inspector, going slightly red.

"Better—much better," murmured Norman.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"The girl has sense," continued Norman, lying back with a dreamy look in his eyes. "Anybody with half an eye can see the intelligence shimmering all over her like a halo."

"But you're never met Miss Trevor, sir," protested the inspector. "In any case, she's wrong. She must be wrong. If Livingstone didn't kill Roper, who did? Miss Trevor was ringing up just as you came in, sir. She had remembered something which might be useful. It seems that the young man who was with the tramp last night is staying at the Red Lion. I'm going along to see him presently."

"Do," advised Norman cordially.

The fact that he would inevitably meet the inspector again at the Red Lion in no way disturbed him. All he wanted, at the moment, was to have a chat with the prisoner. And he meant to have it.

It restored his faith in human nature to hear that Miss Trevor regarded the arrest of the tramp exactly as he had regarded it. He felt that she was a kindred soul.

Rising to his feet, he waved an imperious hand and Mr. Marshall led the way to the cells. He unlocked a door and Norman stepped quickly inside. The unfortunate Mandeville Livingstone, starting to his feet, and opening his mouth in order to greet Norman with a cry of recognition, was startled to see his visitor place a finger over his lips. But Mr. Marshall was not aware of this; all Mr. Marshall could see was Norman's back.

"So this is the fellow, eh?" said Norman sternly. "All right, Inspector. You can leave us. I want to have a few words with the accused in private."

"Yes, sir," said the inspector meekly.

He closed the door, and they heard his heavy footsteps going down the stone-flagged passage.

"Just a wheeze, comrade, to hear your end of this cockeyed story," murmured Norman. "I've fooled the old boy into thinking I'm a man from Scotland Yard. As he may rumble me at any moment, you'd better spill your piece while the spilling is good."

"You shouldn't ought to have done a thing like that, guv'nor," said the tramp hoarsely. "You'll get yourself into trouble——"

"Trouble and I are lifelong pals," said Norman blithely.

He was inspecting his new friend with razor-keen eyes which missed nothing. Mandeville Livingstone was looking haggard and strained. Lack of sleep and the awful charge hanging over his head were responsible for these changes. There was a dazed, incredulous look in his eyes, and Norman

had seldom seen a more pathetic figure.

"I never done it, guv'nor," whispered the tramp, clinging to Norman's sleeve with the frantic despair of a frightened child. "Gord! When they woke me up in the middle of the night and found that stick in the ditch, I thought I was going off me head! I never done it, guv'nor! I shifted my camp, just as you suggested; I went a couple of miles along the Studbury road and pitched my tent on a bit of common."

"Any idea how the blood stains got on your clothes?"

"Oh, them!" The tramp looked more frightened than ever. "They took my jacket away, sir. There wasn't any blood on it when I went to sleep. I never killed him——"

"All right, brother—don't mistake me for the judge," said Norman soothingly.

As a keen observer of human character, he was ready to swear that this unfortunate little man was innocent. But there was no denying that he was in a very nasty mess. The evidence was so simple and straightforward that it was highly dangerous. The fact that Livingstone had no real motive was of secondary importance; for it is not necessary, when the Crown is prosecuting a man for murder, to prove a motive. Nothing counts but the evidence, and on that evidence the jury must find a verdict.

* * *

Inspector Marshall was cogitating over the strange appearance and demeanour of the supposed Chief Inspector Williams, when a large, placid, middle-aged man with apple cheeks entered his office. The large man was dressed in rough tweeds and he looked rather like a prosperous farmer.

"'Morning!" he said affably. "Mr. Marshall, I imagine? My name's Williams—Chief Inspector Williams of Scotland Yard. I'm down here——"

"Here, wait a minute!" interrupted Marshall, rising to his feet something like a sizzling rocket. "What name did you say?"

"Williams, of the Yard," said the visitor, mildly surprised at this reception.

Inspector Marshall glared.

"I don't know who you are, or what your game is, but you've made a mistake that's going to get you into a lot of trouble," he said grimly. "Inspector Williams himself happens to be on the premises at this very moment—talking with a man in the cells."

"That's interesting—and damned unfortunate for you, my friend," said the other, without batting an eyelid. "Somebody has been leading you up the garden." He took an identity card and other things from his pocket. "Take a look

at these."

It was not necessary for Mr. Marshall to make a close inspection. The credentials of the real Chief Inspector Williams were cast iron. An expression of mingled incredulity and outraged fury swept across Mr. Marshall's face like clouds over an April sky.

"That—that young man deliberately deceived me!" he said chokingly.

"Young man, eh?" said Mr. Williams. "You ought to have known that a man in my position would not be particularly young. You say you left him with a prisoner? Which prisoner? Not the man under arrest for the murder of——"

"My God, yes!" gasped Marshall, nearly falling over himself as he made for the door.

He had just remembered that he had not locked the cell, and he was quite convinced that he would find the cell empty, with the birds flown. His relief was considerable, therefore, when he flung the cell door open to see Norman Conquest in earnest conversation with the prisoner.

"Not yet, Marshall—not yet!" said Norman, with an impatient wave. "I will tell you when—— Well, well, well!" His eyes twinkled mischievously as he caught sight of the rosy-checked man behind the local inspector. "What a bloke you are, Sweet William, for turning up at the wrong time!"

A kind of gurgle came from Mr. Williams.

"My God! Conquest!" he ejaculated. "I might have known it! Nobody else would have had the nerve to play a trick like this!"

"You know this man, sir?" babbled Marshall.

"Know him!" said Mr. Williams bitterly. "He's the curse of my life! But I'm hanged if I expected to find him in a one-horse place like Bardlow!"

"Bill, you took the words right out of my mouth," said Norman. "If I had dreamed that you would be despoiling the Bardlow landscape this morning I would have thought up some other wheeze. You're the last man in this whole wide world I expected to see. It's a pretty filthy trick when you come to think of it, butting in like this and spoiling a perfectly good——"

"Come on out of it!" interrupted Mr. Williams, in a patient voice. "If we let him talk, Marshall, he'll go on for hours."

"Keep your pecker up, pal," said Norman, giving Livingstone a friendly pat on the shoulder. "These muddle-headed cops can't keep you in here for long."

"You're for it now, sir," whispered the tramp, his eyes

wide with consternation. "I told you you would be! Like as not they'll put you in a cell, too."

"Before they put me in a cell, brother, they've got to charge me with something," said Norman coolly. "Just relax and keep that chin of yours well up."

He strolled out of the cell with the nonchalant grace of an honoured guest, and he gave Mr. Williams a large wink as he went along the passage to the office. He heard Marshall slamming the cell door with a savage thrust and turning the key in the lock. A moment later Marshall fairly ran into the office.

"Now, young man!" he panted furiously. "I'd like to know what the devil you mean by this? You come into my office and sit on my desk——"

"And push you out of your chair——"

"And tell me that you are Inspector Williams——"

"And stuff you up to the eyes until I get my chat with the prisoner," said Norman coolly. "Yes, I know. Mr. Marshall, I apologize. As one gentleman to another——"

"Apology be damned!" hooted Inspector Marshall. "You have committed an outrageous act of effrontery, and I've half a mind to take you in charge. A man in custody, on a charge of murder, is not supposed to have intercourse with anybody except his own solicitor."

"I know—I know," admitted Norman, in a soothing voice. "But I simply had to see the bloke, and as Sweet William is an old pal of mine, I thought he wouldn't mind my using his name. In any case, you want to see me."

"I want to see you?" glared Mr. Marshall.

"Of course you do. You said so yourself. You were coming round to the Red Lion to have a chat with me."

The inspector clutched at his desk.

"Do you mean to stand there and tell me that you're the young man Miss Trevor spoke about?" he panted. "Were you with the prisoner last night when Roper arrested him?"

"I was with the prisoner for an hour before that, and he entertained me like a gentleman," said Norman Conquest. "And if you think that this harmless little man killed your pestiferous sergeant, you were perfectly right when you talked about your half mind."

The inspector made noises like a leaky radiator and, finding words impossible, he turned appealingly to Williams.

"What's your game, Conquest?" asked Mr. Williams patiently. "I've never known you to do a thing without a reason, and your very presence in this district strikes me as being uncommonly significant. What possible interest can you have in this tramp?"

The Gay Desperado, ignoring the local inspector's baleful look, seated himself on a corner of the desk.

"I don't expect either of you to understand, and my explanation is so simple that it probably sounds feeble," he said calmly. "The fact is, I'm sorry for the chap. Just that and nothing more. As far as I can gather he hasn't a friend in the world; he wanders through this village selling his little toys, and a hulking bully of a police sergeant chivvies him, and then some enterprising merchant bumps the sergeant. This little man takes the rap. It's all so damned one-sided that I thought I'd lend him a helping hand."

"Pah!" exploded Mr. Marshall.

"You can say 'Pah' as much as you like. And those suspicious looks of yours don't ruffle me a bit," said Norman. "You'd better think twice before you start trotting out any charges. I was with Livingstone and Roper when Miss Trevor came along and did her good angel act; but it so happens that I was in bed all night too. Furthermore, it's not a practice of mine to assassinate obnoxious police officers." He strolled leisurely towards the door. "If you want me, I shall be at the Red Lion."

He was not surprised when, twenty minutes later, he observed the large figure of Chief Inspector Williams approaching the Red Lion from the direction of the police station. Norman went out to meet him.

"Well, Bill?"

"You can thank your lucky stars that I was able to vouch for you," grunted Mr. Williams. "I had a hell of a time with Marshall, but I satisfied him, in the end, that you're only having fun. Hang it, Conquest, haven't you any respect for the police at all? You know damned well that it's against all regulations——"

"Who's talking about regulations?" interrupted Norman, as he fell into step beside the chubby-cheeked Yard man.

"Well, we won't argue. I want to know what you're doing down here." Williams gave him a shrewd, searching side-long glance. "I mean, the real reason."

"Must I repeat myself? My car went wrong; I chanced upon this tramp chap, and I saw a pretty face. Quite impulsively, I decided to stay the night in the village. Just that."

"Nothing else?"

"Not a thing. Why?"

"Because experience has taught me that your presence in any particular part of the country means that things are hotting up for a mighty big explosion," replied Mr. Williams.

"Small fry never did interest you, Conquest. Who's the big fish you're trying to get on your line?"

Norman smiled serenely. The situation was not without its funny side. He had no line, and there was no fish. . . .

Or was there?

His smile did not alter in the slightest degree, but inwardly he was no longer feeling humorous. He remembered the unaccountable hunch which had prompted him to stay the night in Great Bardlow. Also, there had been something at the back of his mind ever since the previous evening. He now recalled what it was. A few words spoken by the late Sergeant Roper. "There's been funny things going on in this district lately." They were words that might mean anything or nothing. But the significant fact remained that the speaker of them was already dead! And the blame for the crime was foisted upon the wiry shoulders of the little man who made toy monkeys to amuse the children.

Norman's blood began to warm up again.

"Isn't it about time I asked a leading question, Bill?" he said, coming to a halt, and facing Inspector Williams squarely. "Since when has Scotland Yard evinced such interest in paltry rural crimes?"

His lids were half closed as he watched the inspector's face, as though some of the smoke from his cigarette had got into his eyes. He saw the placid smile on those apple cheeks, but he was not deceived by Mr. Williams' bland expression of innocence. For Mr. Williams had rather given himself away earlier by his reference to a possible "big fish."

"Paltry?" repeated the Yard man lazily. "What gives you the idea that the wilful murder of a police officer is paltry?"

"If there had been no arrest—no palpable murderer—I can well imagine a hefty hue and cry, with the Yard doing all the directing," said Norman Conquest. "But, my dear old Bill, that's not the case. There *has* been an arrest, and the crime has all the earmarks of a petty quarrel, a sudden blow, and—zing!—exit Sergeant Roper." He sighed contentedly. "My faith in human nature is restored. The reason you're here, Bill, is because the Yard doesn't accept the evidence."

Some of Mr. Williams' placidity left him.

"You're a darned sight too shrewd, Conquest," he grumbled.

"I'm right, then?"

"What's the good of denying it? You wouldn't believe me if I did," said the inspector. "And if I don't tell you what I *do* know, you'll get imagining all manner of things. Listen, Conquest, I'm going to take you into my confidence. I'm a perfect fool for doing it, but frankly I don't believe

those denials of yours, and I'm not above accepting help from you, if you can give it."

"Are you suggesting that there are big-time crooks operating in this peaceful retreat?" drawled Norman. "I've a hunch that Roper knew something."

"I thought you said——"

"Bill, until last night I never even knew that Great Bardlow was on the map," Norman interrupted. "But Roper said something about 'queer things happening in the district,' and a few hours later he is dead. Now, Roper was so efficient and enterprising that he poked his nose everywhere. Doesn't it strike you that he poked it a bit too far? And people who commit murder generally have something pretty ugly to hide."

"There may be nothing in it at all," growled Mr. Williams. "But Roper's murder is significant. I said I was going to take you into my confidence, and I will. A week ago Sergeant Roper wrote a letter to the Chief Commissioner. The Chief called me in and showed it to me. It was an impertinent letter, flouting all regulations. Roper said he had made some startling discoveries in this neighbourhood, but as he had no faith in his immediate superior—Inspector Marshall of Studbury—he had not made any report. What he wanted was an interview with the Chief himself. Well, of course a letter like that simply made the Chief see red, and all he did was to communicate with the Chief Constable of the county, suggesting that Roper should be subjected to disciplinary action. I've no doubt that the C.C. was getting the machinery to work. And now Roper is dead—murdered."

"I get it," nodded Norman, his eyes a couple of quartz chips. "The Chief is feeling pretty sorry for himself—sorry that he didn't unwrap himself from his red tape and grant Roper his interview. Now it's too late. Roper's murder means that he *had* got hold of something, and something frizzling hot. It also means that the opposition was 'on' to him, and at the very first chance they bumped him. A murder without a ready-made murderer would have meant intensive police inquiries in the district, so naturally they allowed Roper to live. But this kindly little tramp happens along; he conveniently has a squabble with Roper, and the opposition promptly gets busy. A killer who is not of the district means that there'll be no police activity. Just an inquest, an arrest, and the rope for poor Livingstone after the next county assizes."

"You put it so neatly, dammit, that I'm almost ready to believe that there is an opposition, as you call it," said Inspector Williams gruffly. "But, man alive, it's all airy-

(airy supposition!"

"But you're satisfied that our pal, the tramp, didn't kill Roper, aren't you?" said Norman shrewdly. "Just examine the evidence. First, the little monkey toy found under the body. Beautifully convenient! A direct clue to the tramp, who was selling monkey toys in the village yesterday! Marshall and the constable go to the tramp's tent and find him asleep. Murder doesn't weigh on his conscience a bit. He sleeps like a log, without even troubling to remove the bloodstains from his jacket; and he 'conceals' the bludgeon in the nearest ditch."

"Yes, I know," said Williams, frowning. "But the trouble is, Conquest, all this evidence is as damning as hell. There's not a shred of suggestion that it was faked. The tramp is just a fool, and many murders have been committed by fools."

"Did Marshall tell you about the scratches on the road near the body?"

"Yes."

"Signs of a struggle, eh?"

"That's what Marshall assumes."

"That, alone, ought to establish Livingstone's innocence," said Norman. "Why, if he and Roper had struggled, the little man wouldn't have stood an earthly chance. A sudden leap on his victim from behind—yes. A swift, murderous blow with the club—yes. But signs of a struggle—no! That's just where the evidence fakers overdid it."

"By God, Conquest, I believe you're right!" ejaculated Chief Inspector Williams, his eyes opening wider. "That's a big point—Hey, where are you off to?"

Norman Conquest, without the slightest warning, was striding away with long, lithe steps.

"Just thought of something," he called over his shoulder. "See you later. Sweet William."

And in the Gay Desperado's eyes there was an unholy glint which was not gay at all.

CHAPTER FIVE

TWO FRIGHTENED EYES

IT WAS a pleasant walk to Great Bardlow Hall, with rolling meadow-lands on either side, and a glimpse here and there of the willow-lined river, with an occasional barge lazily making its way down the stream. But Norman Conquest had no thoughts for the scenery as he walked.

While talking with Mr. Williams, a significant thought had struck him with the force of a physical blow. The man who had killed Sergeant Roper must have known about Roper's altercation with the tramp—for, on the strength of that altercation, the evidence against Livingstone had been faked.

And the only person, in addition to Norman himself, who knew of the little quarrel was—the Trevor girl! She had had no reason to keep the thing to herself, and it was quite likely that she had spoken to several people during the previous evening. And one of those persons had seen his opportunity and had acted.

The thought that Sergeant Roper himself might have talked did not receive any serious consideration from Norman. He had seen Roper and he had sized him up. Roper was not the talkative kind. It was against his very nature to go about telling people that he had arrested a tramp for assault and had then let the man go because of a girl's pleading. That would have implied weakness—and Roper was a strong man.

No. The girl was the key. In all innocence she had told somebody of what had happened. A few friendly words with her might make all the difference. Norman's interest in the affair, merely transient at first, had now congealed into something tangible. Inspector Williams' story of that letter to the Chief Commissioner made all the difference. Sergeant Roper had been killed because he knew a great deal more than was healthy for some person or persons, at present unknown. In spite of his preoccupied thoughts, Norman could not help admiring the beautifully kept flower beds which lined either side of the fine gravel drive of the Hall. Through the trees he caught a glimpse of the building itself; a stately, dignified, yet charming old mansion of the Elizabethan period.

On every hand there was evidence of wealth and ageless care. Those perfect lawns were hundreds of years old; the fine old trees had provided shade for the courtiers of King Charles; the house itself, with its sprawling comfort, had sheltered many a noble buck. The sun was shining, the birds were twittering, and the whole scene was one of placid peacefulness. It seemed almost sacrilegious to think of murder and sordid crime in such surroundings.

A bent, bespectacled man was walking down the drive towards Norman, and as he approached he looked at the immaculate stranger with an air of polite inquiry.

"If there is anything I can do, sir——?"

The scholarly man paused both in motion and speech.

"I think not, professor," said Norman easily. "I believe

I am quite active enough, and strong enough, to accomplish my mission entirely unaided. I have reason to believe that this noble pile shelters a certain exceedingly fair damsel, and I would feign have speech with her. You must pardon the idiom, but these old-word surroundings have got right in amongst me."

The man with the spectacles looked his astonishment, as well he might.

"If you are referring to Miss Primrose——"

"Miss Primrose!" murmured Norman dreamily, as he closed his eyes. "I might have known. Could she possibly have any other name but Primrose?"

A chuckle from the other made him open his eyes.

"I believe Miss Primrose is at home. I am Sangley, Sir Hastings' private secretary. When I first saw you I thought, perhaps, that you were a reporter, and Sir Hastings has instructed me to discourage all such gentlemen."

"My friend, you have fallen into two grave errors," drawled Norman, as he dragged his thoughts away from Primrose Trevor and concentrated his gaze on the secretary. "First, no reporter ever dresses as I am dressed; secondly, no reporter cheerfully permits himself to be called a gentleman."

He could see that the man was inquisitive to know his business; but he did not satisfy Sangley's curiosity. For some reason, which he could not quite explain, he took a dislike to the man. That ingratiating smile on his face was not quite genuine; and the twinkle in his eyes, behind the spectacles, was rather like a ripple on a murky pool. To make matters worse, Sangley was rubbing his hands gently over one another, and Norman noticed two things. They were extraordinarily large hands for such a medium-sized man, and as they rubbed together they made slithery sounds like the scales of some reptile. Trifles, but Norman Conquest, where human beings were concerned, was apt to take more notice of the trifles than the more obvious things.

"If you would care for me to seek Miss Primrose——?"

Apparently, the man had a habit of leaving his questions in a bob-tailed condition for, as before, he paused suggestively.

"Thanks all the same, but I'm one of the world's finest seekers," answered Norman, as he slid a cigarette into his mouth, and flicked his automatic lighter. "So I won't delay you further, professor."

He turned as he spoke, pausing for only a moment, with his back to Sangley, to light his cigarette. And he saw something reflected in the highly polished lighter which sent his pulse rocketing. The metal was slightly concave, and this

had the effect of reducing the image of Sangley's face and distorting it. But no amount of concavity could account for the malevolent glare which Sangley was bestowing upon the back of Norman Conquest's head. His refined, scholarly expression had completely gone, to be replaced by a repulsive and sinister leer.

Norman walked on as leisurely and elegantly as ever. His pulse, after that one leap, had returned to normal. His instinctive dislike of Sangley had received very prompt and startling corroboration. The man could have had no suspicion that his backward glance had been caught by the polished surface of the lighter.

"Interesting—very," murmured Norman tranquilly. "So we have a private secretary who washes his hands in the air—a habit which ought to be punishable by law—and who gives a passable imitation of the Demon King behind a chap's back. He could walk into the green light of any pantomime and no questions asked."

But the Desperado's flippancy, as usual, cloaked his real grimness. He placed Sangley as Suspect No. 1 on his mental list; and it is worth noting that Norman was dead on a bull's-eye at the first shot.

So this charming old-world place was not so innocent as it appeared to be on the surface. And, having had one minor shock, Norman was now prepared for anything. His estimation of the dead Sergeant Roper's intelligence was soaring. A pity the man had been so self-centred and secretive. Well, anyway, he had paid dearly—as dearly as any man can pay.

The great door was opened in answer to Norman's ring by Dawes, the butler. Subconsciously, Norman found himself giving the man a scrutiny which, ordinarily he would not have bothered about. And further discoveries romped on the heels of the first. Dawes looked everything that a butler should look; but there was just that *something* which Norman's super-acute sixth sense quiveringly detected. A certain queer hardness behind the eyes; a little peculiarity in the shape of the ears; a cruel looseness of the mouth. Norman saw all these things in a fleeting glance as he smiled upon the butler.

"Good morning, serf," he said cheerfully. "Be good enough to inform My Lady Primrose that her friend who is partial to smoky rabbit would like to have a few words."

"I beg your pardon, sir?" asked the surprised Dawes.

"I dare say you do; but Miss Primrose will understand."

Norman strolled in as though he owned the place, parked his hat on a statuette of Psyche, and made himself at home. The butler, after a moment's hesitation—for he was not ac-

customed to dealing with such guests—passed in a butler-like way down the hall and vanished. In a few minutes Sir Hastings Trevor appeared in person, and he advanced towards Norman with a look of half-hostile inquiry.

"I understand that you wish to see my daughter?"

"And why not?" said Norman, with his most charming smile. "Any man, I imagine, would get a big kick out of seeing your daughter, sir. I'm one of her new friends. Brand new, in fact. I met her once—last night. We talked about slices of rabbit cooked over a camp fire——"

"If you'll be good enough to tell me what the hell you're talking about, perhaps we might get somewhere," interrupted Sir Hastings, with annoyance. "I can't waste my time on young men who come into my house talking drip. What the devil do you mean—slices of rabbit? Who are you, anyway?"

Norman Conquest was experiencing a nasty jar. Just as he had instinctively taken a dislike to Sangley, the secretary, he was taking a similar dislike to Sangley's employer. He did not object to Sir Hastings' "heavy father" act; he could easily excuse that in a tradition-ridden country squire. There was something entirely different about the man; a sort of invisible aura of indefinable evil that made a bee-line for Norman's marrows. The young man who called himself "1066" possessed an extraordinary power of getting the correct number of a person he was meeting for the first time. In this case he had been partially prepared. He had already met two people within the precincts of the Hall, and he knew them to be wrong 'uns. But he had never expected to detect this same quality in the father of the sweet girl he had met overnight.

"Sorry if my flippancy irritates you, Sir Hastings," said Norman smoothly. "I had an idea that your daughter might be able to help that poor bloke in the clink."

"If you mean the wretched tramp who so brutally murdered Sergeant Roper, you're wasting your time," said Sir Hastings, in a curt voice. "In any case, I wouldn't allow you to discuss the matter with Primrose. She is intensely distressed over the whole lamentable business."

"I'm glad to hear," said Norman carefully, "that she is distressed. In fact, I understand that she doesn't agree with the action the police have taken——"

"Nonsense!" broke in Sir Hastings angrily. "Who put such a ridiculous idea into your head? My unhappy daughter is positively ill; she feels that she is partially to blame for Roper's death. For if she had not intervened, Roper would have arrested the man——" He broke off abruptly. "But

I see no reason why I should stand here discussing the subject with you, young man. Who the devil are you, anyway?"

The Gay Desperado looked at his host out of two calm, rock-steady eyes.

"My name," he said deliberately, "is Norman Conquest."

Norman was not a vain young man, but he had half an idea that his name was not unknown; and he watched for the reaction. He was not disappointed. Sir Hastings Trevor did not move a muscle, except for a quick tightening of his lips and a little twitching about his eyes. What it cost him to retain his composure it was difficult to estimate.

"You are not improving matters, sir, by being ridiculous," he exploded—and Norman did not fail to detect the sudden hoarseness in his voice. "Norman Conquest, indeed. If you expect me to believe that you bear such an absurd name, I must tell you frankly that I'm not a fool."

But Norman did not even hear him. His quick eye had caught a glimpse of a door opening a little distance down the hall—and behind the landowner's back. A pale, frightened face appeared for a brief moment; a sweet, fragile and childlike face, with eyes that shone with an unnamed terror. Norman felt a little stab go right through him, but his expression did not alter by a fraction. He saw Primrose Trevor give one gesture with her hand, imploring him to go. Then, without a sound, the door closed.

"Frightfully sorry, Sir Hastings, but you mustn't blame me for the humorous whim of my parents," said Norman easily. "As we don't seem to be getting on like long-lost brothers, perhaps I'd better push off. All the same, I'm sorry I can't have a word with your daughter."

He detached his hat from its novel perch, bowed gracefully to Sir Hastings, and let himself out. His host had not spoken again, but Norman had heard his forced breathing.

"Phew! We make rapid strides," murmured the Desperado, as he passed down the drive. "If that bloke doesn't know who killed Sergeant Roper, then I'm a horse's uncle! And was he shocked when he heard my name!"

All very satisfactory—up to a point. The curse of it was, this man was Primrose Trevor's father! And, in his mind's eyes, he had visualized the father of that girl as somebody with the kindest of eyes and the most genial of smiles.

It was not usual for Norman Conquest to feel mentally bludgeoned, but the two frightened eyes he had seen for that fleeting second had given him a bad turn. There was a secret in this tranquil-looking house which sent a cold shiver down his spine.

Suddenly, he checked his footsteps. He had turned the

first bend in the drive and the house was hidden from view. His quick ears had caught the faint pad of footsteps on the grass and the soft swish of skirts. As he half turned, Primrose Trevor broke through the bushes on his immediate left.

"Why, what the——"

Norman stopped. As she laid trembling fingers on his arm she was breathing quickly and she reminded him of some panting gazelle. Her sweet face was full of acute alarm.

"I slipped away—the trees concealed me," she whispered. "You must go—go right away! Forget everything!"

She was very close to him, so utterly feminine, so young and frightened, that he felt his blood racing with unaccustomed fire. He looked into her blue eyes, and what he saw there brought forth all those instincts of knight-errantry which he had inherited from his fighting Cumberland forefathers.

"Go away and forget?" he repeated softly. "What do you think I am—a hunk of ice? I've got about fifty-seven questions, of all varieties, on the tip of my tongue at this very moment. But I'll ask only one. Are you in danger?"

She cast a terrified look over her slim shoulder. It was an eloquent answer to his question.

"If you want to help me, you must go!" she whispered. "If I am seen talking to you——"

"Meet me somewhere else then."

"No, no."

"This evening, perhaps?"

"All right!" Her eyes softened into a look of sudden hope as she flashed them on him. "The stile—where we first met—where the tramp had his camp fire. Meet me there at ten o'clock this evening."

"Now you're talking," said Norman crisply. "I was about to suggest——"

He was talking to the thin air. She had gone, and all he heard was the faint swish of her skirts and the soft padding of her feet on the lawn. Parting the bushes, he was just in time to catch a glimpse of her slim and graceful figure as it vanished into a dense shrubbery.

CHAPTER SIX

THE POLICEMAN WHO READ EDGAR WALLACE

NORMAN CONQUEST was strangely troubled as he walked along the sunlit road towards Great Bardlow. He had seen terror

in human eyes on many occasions; but never had he been moved as he was moved now. Perhaps the sharp contrast between the tranquillity of his surroundings and the sinister mystery which brooded beneath that veneer was partly responsible.

What hell's brew had he stumbled into? He had seen four people within the precincts of Bardlow Hall. Sangley, the private secretary—a venomous human snake, if ever Norman had seen one! Dawes, the butler—an old lag with the hall-mark stamped all over him. Sir Hastings Trevor—as nasty a piece of nature's work as one could imagine. Primrose Trevor—gentle, frightened, a creature of purity and innocence entangled in this mesh of vice and crime!

What was the answer? That she knew of her father's evil doing was obvious. Perhaps she was loyal to him; perhaps she even loved him; but the grim secret she carried was too great to be concealed within her sweet person. Norman felt his pulses fairly pounding as he walked. It was a new experience, and it filled him full of wonder—to say nothing of a certain amount of uneasiness. Almost reluctantly, as though his brain processes had become clogged, he found that he was dragging his thoughts towards Joy Everard. And his unease was created by the suggestion that his thoughts concerning Primrose Trevor were rankly disloyal to Joy. Then he laughed.

"Young Pixie is the grandest pal I ever had," he told himself. "Anyhow, she's not here and she doesn't know anything about——"

At this point his thoughts stumbled. Slashing honesty, paradoxically enough, was one of his outstanding qualities. The very idea of doing anything underhand was abhorrent to him—as foreign to his nature as dodging danger. He walked straight to the red concrete telephone booth in the village street—the one touch of ultra-modernity in those quaintly rustic surroundings—and rang up a Clacton-on-Sea number.

"Thought I'd give you a ring, Pixie," he said, with all his usual gaiety, when he heard Joy's voice at the other end of the line. "How are the aunts? How are you?"

"You didn't call me up to ask those questions, Desperado," came the girl's clear serene voice. "What's on your mind?"

The question gave Norman an unaccustomed feeling of resentfulness. He gave no credit to Joy for her shrewdness in sensing the truth; for he had something on his mind, and he disliked the reminder.

"I'm not in London," he continued, forcing himself to speak nonchalantly. "I happened to come across a tramp bloke in a neck of the woods called Great Bardlow last

night. Poor chap's in trouble. There might be something big developing. Anyhow, don't worry and have a good time."

"If you think you can leave me out of anything fruity, just begin thinking all over again!" said Joy Everard promptly. "You're not kidding me a bit, Desperado. You sound too careless. What's the new setup?"

"There isn't any setup, you silly young chump!" retorted Norman. "This tramp bloke——"

"Yes, but who's the girl?"

"Girl?"

"Blonde or brunette?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, there *is* a girl, and she's blonde and blue-eyed," replied Norman deliberately. "But, honestly, young Pixie, there's no earthly need for you to come into the scenario. I haven't got hold of anything tangible, and it may be a fizzle. If I need you I'll phone again. If I don't phone, just forget everything and have a good time. I can easily handle this thing alone."

Joy, at the other end of the wire, wrinkled her small elfin face. She was silent for a moment. There was a quality in Norman's voice which brought a tiny maggot of doubt creeping into her mind. His tone lacked its usual flippancy and was inclined to be a trifle impatient. And never once, since the first moment of their association, had he been impatient with her. His very vagueness was significant.

"Great Bardlow, did you say?" she asked calmly.

"Yes, it's a little village in Suffolk, just north of the Essex border," said Norman. "I'm staying at the Red Lion, but I don't think there's a phone there. I'm speaking from a public booth."

He was speaking, too, in an abstracted voice. He could see the little police station quite distinctly, and he could see Inspector Williams' car standing outside. Norman's brain, never content unless it was buzzing like a dynamo, was as busy as ever. He had suddenly got an idea.

"You might at least give me a hint of the trouble you're butting into," came Joy's voice. "I've never known you to waste your time on small game, and——"

"I can't tell you anything because I don't know anything myself—or precious little," interrupted Norman. "Now, be a good sport, Pixie, and leave this thing to me. The instant I want you, I'll ring through again. Cheerio!"

He hung up before she could question him further and after a moment of peculiar discomfort, which he could not quite diagnose, he switched his mind on to another track. He put two more pennies into the box and called the police station.

"Ah, Marshall!" he said, when he heard Inspector Marshall's voice. "I understand that you've got a Scotland Yard man with you? I want to see him."

Norman's voice was no longer his own; it was an astonishingly accurate reproduction of that of Sir Hastings Trevor. Every inflection, every tonal quality, was the same. That the mimicry was perfect was proved by Marshall's reply.

"You want to see Inspector Williams, Sir Hastings?"

"Yes. Some very vital evidence has cropped up." Norman spoke with great urgency, as though under strain. "I can't go into details over the phone. It looks like a sensational new angle on this Roper murder. Get up to the Hall as quickly as you can and bring Williams with you."

"Yes, sir," came Marshall's startled voice.

Norman Conquest grinned as he gently replaced the receiver on its bracket. He was gratified, a minute later, to see Marshall and Williams dash out of the police station, lock it, and then tumble into the Yard man's car.

"Perfect!" drawled the Desperado contentedly.

The car was disappearing round the bend of the village street as he emerged from the telephone box and walked towards the police station. At a rough guess, he had about twenty minutes for action. It was not one of his habits to play footling practical jokes, and in sending Sweet William to the Hall on a wild-goose chase he was simply obeying a hunch.

The deceased Roper had lived at the police station; he had been making secret investigations; and he had got something. But he had made no report. A quick look through Roper's effects might be very informative.

Norman Conquest walked into the police station with perfect ease, unlocking the front door with a key which he had annexed from a hook in the office earlier. It was probably Roper's own key. He grinned as he walked quickly into the back sitting room. He knew that Roper had lived alone, that an elderly woman had gone in daily to cook Roper's meals and do the housework. Norman had picked up quite a few facts while gossiping at the Red Lion. Naturally, the daily woman was not on the job today, and only an urgent rush call would have caused Inspector Marshall to leave the police station in its present unoccupied condition. There was probably a constable knocking about somewhere, but he was either in bed or on his beat. Norman Conquest did not worry.

He had wasted no time in the office. Williams had ransacked the office. The sitting room was very tidy and orderly, and not a great deal like a bachelor's quarters. But then,

Roper had been a tidy and methodical man.

"Well, well" murmured Norman softly.

He looked about him, vastly intrigued. There were no less than three bookcases in the room and each bookcase was filled with novels, complete in their brightly coloured jackets. And they were the works of one author—no less a master of thriller fiction than the late Edgar Wallace!

Norman withdrew one or two of the books from the shelves at random, and he found the pages well thumbed, proving that the books had been read and read again. Here and there passages were marked with blue pencil. On the flyleaf of each book was Roper's bold signature, and the date on which he had made the purchase.

"So, our disagreeable copper was an ardent student of the great Edgar," murmured Norman. "One of the reasons, perhaps, for his go-getting methods. The poor bloke evidently had the mistaken idea that he was a second Sergeant Elk!"

One glance at the bureau told him that Williams had already gone through it. Which probably meant that Williams had gone over the whole room. But Norman went over it, too, his eyes missing nothing. He did not spend more than five minutes over the task, for something seemed to tell him he was wasting his time.

He went upstairs. He found Roper's bedroom without difficulty. Just an ordinary, plain bedroom, at present in a considerable state of disorder—the trail of Williams. Roper's suits were lying on the bed, and the door of a typical country house cupboard was standing wide open. A mackintosh and a hat were hanging on a peg at the back. There was a whole row of pegs all along the back of the cupboard.

It was shadowy in the cupboard for the opened door shut out most of the light from the window. A deep, old-fashioned cupboard, irregular in shape, with a slanting shelf at the top, and the whole interior painted with a particularly drab-coloured paint. Norman switched on his powerful electric torch and directed the light into the corners. He was looking for nothing in particular, but Roper had been a secretive man, and bedroom cupboards are often full of surprises.

He directed the beam of light downwards, and then held it rock steady as a little smudge of fresh mud on the side wall came into the radius of white brilliance. The smudge was about eighteen inches from the floor, and in one or two spots where the mud was thickest it was not quite dry.

"H'm! Queer!" muttered Norman, frowning. "It looks as though some article—presumably a boot—was brushed against the wall, and quite recently too."

He crouched down closer. His pulse had suddenly quickened. There was something wrong about this smudge. It was, in fact, an impossible smudge. It extended to the rear wall of the cupboard and was then cut abruptly short.

"By God! When this muddy object was brushed against the side wall *the back of the wall wasn't here!*" ejaculated Norman Conquest keenly. "Which means only one thing."

He flashed his light up and down. The back of the cupboard was of painted matchboarding and looked very old. It looked solid too. When Norman pushed on it there was no immediate response, but he felt a slight quiver. He pushed harder and then suddenly stopped. Idiot! Unless there was a truly enormous cavity behind the false back, it obviously opened outwards. But the shelf was in the way——

"Of course the shelf is in the way!" said Norman, with sudden understanding. "It's the shelf that keeps the false door hard closed. Pretty ingenious."

He saw that the shelf was resting on stout wooden supports, and a quick upwards thrust forced it out of position and he was able to take it down. And the back of the cupboard, of its own accord, swung outwards!

"Now," murmured Norman, "we're getting somewhere."

He flashed his light into the cavity. It was fairly shallow and was, in fact, the original cupboard. No doubt Roper had cleverly fitted the false back. But why? What need has a police officer, in charge of a small rural police station, to have a secret hiding place?

Norman soon had his answer, but it only made the riddle more complicated than ever. He now saw that the smudge extended right into the back cavity and standing on the floor just beyond, was a pair of angler's wading boots, the feet of which were smothered with half-caked mud. There were some very ancient hooks sticking out of the true wall of the cupboard rear, and on these hooks hung some extraordinary garments.

The main item was a one-piece suit of soft black cloth, crudely fashioned and sewn, with cloth-covered black buttons down the front and strong elastic at the ankles. Item No. 2 was a black hood of the same material with buttonholes so arranged that they corresponded with buttons on the shoulders of the suit. The sleeves had no ends, but were fashioned like baby gloves.

"Edgar Wallace," said Norman Conquest, "has a lot to answer for!"

He could imagine Sergeant Roper in this get-up—a mysterious black figure stalking through the night, hooded so that he was practically a part of the night itself. The whole sinis-

ter-looking suit was, indeed, so obviously borrowed from an Edgar Wallace novel that Norman found himself smiling.

A curious and remarkable get-up for a law-abiding country policeman! He noticed some little scraps of duckweed and other water plants clinging to the leg parts of the suit. The legs were damp well beyond the knees.

No masterpiece of deduction was necessary to conclude that Roper's nocturnal activities had been conducted near the river—and, in fact, *in the river*. The angler's wading boots, alone, were sufficient evidence of this. So the deceased sergeant's investigations, which he had wished to impart to the Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard, were connected with the river.

Norman's opinion of Roper mounted by leaps and bounds. A nasty-tempered bloke, but what a go-getter! He had made this strange suit with his own hands, and it was any odds that he had conducted his investigations at dead of night in off-duty hours. But Norman did not exaggerate the importance of his discoveries. A man with an Edgar Wallace complex is apt to do queer things! But for the fact that Roper was dead and brutally murdered, Norman might have concluded that the man had been merely amusing himself.

He inspected the clothing more closely. There was a roughly made patch pocket in front of the one-piece suit, and Norman thrust his hand into it almost casually. His fingers encountered something small and hard.

"Shades of Tiffany!" he murmured softly.

The thing in his hand was a superb diamond earring! Norman was an expert where jewellery was concerned, and he knew at the first glance that the glorious blue diamond, as large as a bean, was the real thing.

The pocket gave up no further treasure and as the time was now getting short, Norman quickly replaced the clothing, pushed the shelf back into its place, and took his departure. There was no reason why he should tell Sweet William of this. If the Yard man was unable to use his own eyes, it was his own fault.

Quite openly Norman Conquest let himself out of the police station and strolled towards the Red Lion. He was thoughtful. How was Primrose Trevor mixed up in this grim mystery? Perhaps he would know tonight. That the girl's father was deeply involved, and that she was afraid for him, was almost a certainty. Perhaps the man Sangley was the real master of Bardlow Hall!

Norman's thought's were interrupted by the blaring toot of an electric automobile horn. He glanced up and saw Inspector Williams' car bearing down upon him like some

juggernaut. Williams jerked the car to a standstill and fairly vomited out into the road.

"Hey, you!" he exclaimed thickly.

"It's not the first time, Bill, that I've had occasion to call you to order for addressing me as 'Hey, you!'" Norman Conquest eyed the angry Yard man with mild wonder. "What's the trouble? You look flustered."

"You know what the trouble is!" fumed Mr. Williams. "What the hell do you mean by phoning the police station half an hour ago and pretending to be Sir Hastings Trevor?"

Norman's expression was one of bland innocence.

"It can't be the sun because it isn't strong enough," he said. "Perhaps you can explain, Mr. Marshall? Has Bill been like this for long?"

"Mr. Williams has been telling me about your funny tricks, young man," retorted Mr. Marshall, glaring. "If you didn't talk to me on the telephone, who did?"

"But why should I talk to you on the telephone?" asked Norman, in wonder.

"All right—all right!" broke in Williams, restraining himself with difficulty. "You'd better get back to the station, Marshall. I'll talk to Conquest. Not that I'll get anything out of him."

Marshall went off and the Chief Inspector gave Norman a hard, searching look.

"Now, look, Conquest," he said, in a tired, pleading voice. "I know you like to play games and I dare say you get some fun out of doing so. But why send me flying up to this Trevor man on a fool's errand? When we got to the Hall, he didn't know anything about the telephone call and practically accused us of being looney. If you can give any good reason——"

"But, my poor Bill, I don't know what the devil you're talking about," interrupted Norman, smiling.

But his eyes, behind that smile, carried such a mischievous twinkle that Sweet William knew in his heart that the Gay Desperado had indeed been "playing games." But as there was no earthly chance of making him admit it, the inspector changed the subject.

"I've been along to have a look at the spot where Roper was killed," he grunted. "Made a discovery, too."

"Fine!"

"There's been practically no traffic, and the 'struggle marks' on the road are plain to see. And there's one interesting detail. The spot happens to be nearly opposite a gate which leads into a field. Sometime yesterday a farm tractor must have come out of that field and stopped on the road for

a bit, leaving behind a smallish pool of oil. At a late hour last night the oil must have spread and become partially dry. Anyhow, the marks on the road crisscross this oil spot . . ."

"I get it!" interrupted Norman, nodding. "You're going to examine Roper's No. 12's and Livingstone's shoes. If the edges of the soles don't show any trace of oil, you'll know that neither of them made the struggle marks."

"Well, yes," admitted Mr. Williams.

"It's a big point, Bill. The murderer didn't notice that oil spot in the darkness, and now he's got oily smears on his shoes," said Norman. "My dear fellow, it's easy! Find a bloke with oil on his shoes, and you've got your man! By the way, what do you think of this?"

He suddenly dangled the diamond earring in front of Inspector Williams' startled eyes. The latter gave one searching look, then made a frantic grab.

"One of Lady Launceston-Bevan's stolen earrings!" he yelled excitedly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DANGER OUT OF THE DARKNESS

IT WAS SO SELDOM that Mr. Williams broke through his shell of placidity that Norman Conquest eyed him with amused surprise. Indeed, he had never seen the rosy-cheeked inspector quite so shaken. Having snatched the earring, he was turning it over and over in his quivering hands.

"Yes, it's part of the Launceston-Bevan job, without a doubt!" he said, as though speaking to himself. "By God! We've got a lead at last!" He stopped abruptly and looked at the laughing young adventurer. "Or have we?"

"I read about it in the papers," drawled Norman, as he lit a cigarette. "Big Mayfair robbery—society hostess robbed of jewels worth eighty thousand pounds. It happened a fortnight ago today. Two nights ago there was another big robbery—"

"You're telling me?" interrupted Williams bitterly. "For Heaven's sake, Conquest, don't try to be funny with me, or I shall fall dead on the spot! Where did you get this earring?" His voice had a pleading, melancholy ring in it.

"If I thought you had anything to do with this racket—" "So there's a racket, is there?" smiled Norman, as he leaned negligently against Mr. Williams' car. "Listen, Bill. If you weren't so festooned in red tape I might treat you as a pal. All I can say is this—while you were fooling about at

the Hall I was putting in a spot of work. If it'll help you at all, I'll add that Roper had this earring in his possession yesterday."

Norman could almost see Sweet Williams' brain processes at work. The apple-cheeked inspector's face changed its expressions with the speed of a kaleidoscope.

"Then it *was* you who made that fake phone call!" he growled ferociously. "While the police station was empty, you went through it like a gale. You found this earring—Roper got hold of it earlier somehow. That's why he wrote that infernal letter to the Chief! Where did you find it, Conquest?" His voice suddenly became stern and official. "You'd better talk or I'll run you in as a suspect!"

Norman Conquest's laughter rippled into the sunshine.

"Be yourself, Bill," he admonished. "Do you seriously think I would mix myself up in this pettifogging snatch-and-grab racket——"

"Pettifogging!" The word came from Sweet William like an explosion of T.N.T. "Why, you blithering young idiot, don't you know that the Yard is up against the biggest crime racket of the century?"

"Is it?" murmured Norman innocently.

"Don't stand there and say 'is it' or I'll scream!" fumed the agitated inspector. "Two million pounds netted every year by burglars and housebreakers! Last year's figures for London alone—nine hundred thousand pounds' worth of stuff stolen! And only one hundred and fifty thousand pounds' worth recovered! And this sort of thing is going on all over the country. This isn't fancy—it's hard, cold fact. Some of the newspapers—curse their guts—have been spreading these figures all over their front pages. And the devil of it is, they're substantially correct!"

"Your collar's too small, Bill," said Norman mildly.

"Curse my collar!" almost shrieked Mr. Williams, as he tore at the sticky article in question and jerked it off its stud. "I've been working on this burglary racket and I've got nowhere. I come down here on a special job, and I not only find you messing about in the district but this earring turns up! It looks as though Roper had a lead, and the fool keeps the information to himself and gets himself bumped. Now we're no better off than we were!"

"You've got the earring."

"Yes, but where did it come from? How did Roper get hold of it?" demanded Williams. "All these burglaries couldn't happen, Conquest, unless there was a master fence behind them. That's the whole damnable secret. Somewhere, there's the Big Brain of the entire organization, and we at

the Yard are convinced that burglars are being financed all over the country. As soon as they've done a job, they turn the stuff in—and the stuff vanishes. That's ninety per cent of our trouble. In the old days we could make a round of the known receivers and, in the majority of cases, we located the stuff while it was still hot. Now it simply vanishes into thin air."

Norman was secretly pleased by his strategy. Only by pitch-forking the inspector into a condition of apoplectic excitement had he obtained this "inside dope." Williams was usually a very reticent man and thoroughly level-headed. Norman was not interested in the earring. Williams was welcome to it.

"I'll be at the Red Lion if you want me, Bill," said Norman casually.

He walked off before Mr. Williams could recover his breath. Like a certain celebrated lady, he wanted to be alone. Williams, he knew, had not the faintest breath of suspicion against Sir Hastings Trevor or any member of his household, and Norman had no intention of giving him any further tips. But Norman's own suspicions were razor-edged.

At the Red Lion he lunched leisurely and chatted with the landlord, the serving maid, and anybody else he could charm into speech—and for a young man of Norman's personality this was easy. He gleaned many interesting facts.

Sir Hastings Trevor was more than the "squire." He was more than a landowner. Up the river there were immense flour mills, and the flour mills were supplied by a fleet of modern steel barges which came right in from the sea. Sir Hastings owned mills and barges and everything.

And Sergeant Roper had conducted his investigations in the river!

Norman spent a lazy afternoon and evening lolling about in the Red Lion's comfortable smoking room. He was merely marking time. Towards teatime, Williams called on him and he appeared to be his old unruffled self. He told Norman that he had examined Roper's boots and the tramp's shoes and he had found no traces of oil smudges. But he attached little importance to this, and he added that Livingstone had been brought before the bench in Studbury and formally remanded after brief evidence of arrest.

Mr. Williams was inclined to be sociable, and he was apparently hoping that Norman would respond. But for once the usually gay "1066" was silent and almost bored. He seemed to have lost all interest in the affair. Williams could not know that a sweet, frightened face kept intruding its way

across Norman's mental vision. The time was a little after nine, and all Norman could think of just now was that he was to meet Primrose Trevor at ten.

"I'm sorry, Bill; afraid I'm not the life and soul of the party," said Norman, as he rose and stretched his seventy-two inches of supple youth. "I'm going for a walk."

"Suits me," said Mr. Williams. "I'm rather partial——"

"Alone," added Norman gently.

He had not meant to start until about nine-forty, but the inspector rather irritated him and he went off at once. After all, it was better to be on the spot early. The girl might get there before time too. And Norman had a hunch, as large as the Empire State Building, that his meeting with her would open up new possibilities.

As soon as he got out of the village, the darkness enveloped him like a cloak. The village itself boasted no actual street light, but the publicans of Great Bardlow seemed to be an enterprising lot, one vieing with another to make his premises bright and inviting; and as there were inns throughout the length of the whole village, the result was most pleasing.

Once this Wet Zone was left behind, however, and the wayfarer found himself in the high-hedged rural lanes, there was no gleam of light to relieve the all-surrounding gloom. Great Bardlow was peculiar in that there were no straggling cottages beyond the village limits. Once the last dwelling had been left behind, particularly on this narrow byway, there was nothing on either side but the hedges and lots of trees. Norman had plenty of reason to remember its utter loneliness.

As he walked briskly along, forgetting even to smoke, he was filled with an unwonted yeasty feeling. He put this down to the fact that he had got rid of Sweet William. His step was springy and he was feeling grand. He was glad that fate had directed him towards this sleepy backwater of Suffolk. He had seen her twice today; once as she drove past the Red Lion in her little two-seater, looking fresher and daintier than ever; and again in her father's big limousine, with Sir Hastings sitting by her side. She had looked a little different on this occasion—serious and preoccupied.

The thought that he might be able to render her a service had a somewhat alarming effect. He began to sing. Anyhow, why be stingy? What was the matter with three or four services? He sang louder and his stride became more swinging, keeping time to the rhythm of his song.

He was passing through an avenue where the tree branches met overhead—one of the local beauty spots on a sunny summer's day, with the sunshine making patterns on the road. There came a faint crackle from above as Norman walked

along; and then something black and shapeless descended—straight down towards his shoulders.

At any other time Norman Conquest would have been aware of his danger with several seconds to spare. But with a song on his lips, and the vision of a girl before his eyes, he was just a little slow on the uptake. He sensed the peril when it was almost too late—but not quite.

In the last fraction of a second he sidestepped, scarcely knowing why he did so. And the mystery figure, instead of landing with crushing force on his shoulders, struck the hard road and reeled against him. And the Gay Desperado's song, frozen in his throat, was replaced by a muttered exclamation of anger, and he suddenly found that he was sweating.

"Neat, brother, but apt to be chancey," murmured Norman Conquest, as his fist shot out and rammed hard into tough flesh and muscle.

He heard a grunting gasp from the would-be assailant; at the same time, there came a swift pad of footsteps from the left, and as he swung round in that direction he heard the crackle of twigs on the right. To see anything was impossible, for the darkness of the night was intensified by the canopy of entwined branches overhead.

Norman saw a smudge of superblackness looming up at his side, and he lashed out with a right and a left in quick succession. The first missed; the second sogged into a face and something broke. For there was dynamite packed in that punch. Seldom had the daring young buccaneer given vent to such ferocious fury—and his anger was not directed against these attackers, but against himself. His bitterness was like double-distilled gall.

Fool! After his experience at Bardlow Hall that morning he ought to have started on this night walk with three or four pairs of eyes and ears as large as Pluto's at full cock. Instead of that, he had been ambling along without a solitary thought of any possible danger.

He heard a muttered oath in a guttural voice, as something swung past his head with a rush of air. The man who had dropped from the tree was on his feet now and charging to attack. There were three of them at least—three shadowy half-shapes in the blackness. For the first time in his adventurous career, Norman Conquest felt, with a tingle up and down his spine, that his carelessness was going to cost him his life. Now that it was too late, he felt a kind of dazed stupefaction at his own lapse, and another burst of anger served him ill. He needed all his wits about him now; all his characteristic cool-headedness. An angry man is a reckless man.

He swung round savagely, striking at another blur of darkness. In a cooler moment he would have sidestepped with that lightning agility for which he was famous. His fist found a mark, but at the same moment his feet were swept from under him as one of the attackers hurled himself at Norman's legs. The Desperado toppled over, and his head struck the hard road with sickening force. He rolled over limply and lay still.

For a moment—hoarse and strained breathing.

"He's out!" came a muttered voice. "Broke his skull in half by the sound of it. Quick! Off the road with him! Don't forget the orders! We've been too long as it is."

With great efficiency, Norman Conquest was lifted and swung through a gap in the hedge. There was a brief pause as one of the men returned to the spot and flashed an electric torch over the road. He joined the others.

"Not a mark anywhere—not even on the banks," he whispered. "Get going."

The meadow was hard and dry, so that no footprints were left. The grass was short-clipped by the recent grazing of sheep. The spot had been chosen well. It was the nearest approach to the river. There was a second meadow, equally dark and lonely, and then the river. The unconscious burden was carried straight onto the deck of a squat, sprawling barge, which lay moored almost exactly opposite the dark and derelict mass of an ancient and abandoned water mill. The river banks, at this point, were strengthened by stonework, like a miniature dock, and the stones were ancient and worn and covered with age-old moss above the surface and slime beneath.

The barge lay in absolute darkness. Even when a hatch was lifted, and a cautious voice bade the newcomers to "bring him down" there was no glimmer of light. In that utter and mysterious blackness, Norman Conquest was quickly lowered into the depths. The last man to follow closed the hatch, and it locked with a curiously soft metallic click.

"Okay, Mr. Sangley!" said the man.

Lights clicked on. Norman was lying on the floor of a plainly furnished but comfortable cabin. The men about him were, apparently, honest bargees. Not one of them had the aspect of a typical criminal. The only exception was Sangley, of the Hall. He, with his scholarly face, his spectacles, and his clerkly clothing, looked very out of place. As he listened to the report, he consulted his watch.

"You are early," he commented. "We did not expect you for another half-hour. So much the better. Strip him." He held up a hand. "Wait. You say that he got his injury by

striking his head on the road? Was there any blood?"

"Not a drop, sir."

The man who spoke was earnest and respectful. Whatever this organization was, one rule appeared to be general—that every member of it should act his part one hundred per cent even when no outsiders were present.

Sangley bent down and examined Norman Conquest's head. The scalp was grazed and there was just a tinge of blood on the hair; and a very ugly bruise was rising.

"No fracture—but he won't come round for an hour at least," said Sangley, rising. "All right. Strip him."

Let it be made quite clear that Norman Conquest was very definitely a total loss. He had been careless and he had paid the price. Which simply means that he was human.

His clothing was removed with deft speed. As Sangley received each article, he emptied the pockets, and then deliberately slashed the linings and examined every square inch of the material. Nothing escaped his concentrated scrutiny. Even Norman's shoes and his hat came in for the same careful inspection. Then, while the Desperado was lying stark on the floor, Sangley gathered up the contents of the pockets, placed them in a small attache case, and gave a signal to the man who stood at the companion.

Instantly the lights went out and the hatch was raised.

"Stand by until you get further orders," he said briefly. "If he shows signs of coming round, knock him on the head again."

Sangley went up into the darkness and made his way ashore. He walked a few yards along the towing path to the gates of a lock, which were closed. There was a wooden platform along the top of the lock gates, and Sangley crossed to the other side. He entered the derelict water mill.

Ten steps down a stone-flagged passage brought him to a deep doorway. He found the handle in the darkness, turned it, and entered a room. As he closed the door, a light came on, splashing full upon him.

"Well?" came a soft, eager voice.

"They got him, miss," said Sangley briefly.

He looked at Primrose Trevor with the respect which is due from a private secretary to his employer's daughter; but at the back of his eyes there was also a hint of fear. The girl was dressed in a long, belted sports coat and a close-fitting beret. She gave a swift, searching look into the attache case, which Sangley opened for her inspection.

"Nothing except the ordinary things a man would carry, miss," said Sangley. "Money—keys—watch—wallet, and so on. Nothing in the wallet except a few currency notes. Not

even a card or a driving licence."

It seems that Norman Conquest had not been entirely neglectful before setting out. Primrose Trevor pursed her lips and tapped her well-shod foot on the stone floor. And those lips, which Norman had thought so ravishingly beautiful, were drawn into a thin, cruel line. The blueness of her eyes had chilled into the coldness of a snakelike glitter. The change in that delicate, demure country miss was incredibly shocking.

"All right," she said, her voice steady and even. "I'll take these, Sangley. Burn all his clothes in the incinerator at once. There must be no waste of time. You and I must be back at the Hall within ten minutes. Your alibi will then be good, and so will mine."

"Yes, miss. And Conquest?"

"Put Conquest into one of the special canvas sacks, weight it, and drop him into Deadwater Deep."

"That's very near, miss——"

"But it is also twenty feet deeper than any other part of the river, and every minute the men carry the sack is a minute of unnecessary risk," replied Primrose Trevor in clipped tones. "That's all, Sangley. Let there be no slip up."

She dismissed him with a slight gesture of her shapely, gloved hand; she had sent him to put a man to death with less feeling than the average girl expresses when she brushes a smudge of dirt from her stocking.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SWEET WILLIAM GETS HIS MAN

WITH A SOFT, slithery plunge, the heavily weighted canvas sack, with its human contents, dropped from the back of the punt into the mysterious blackness of Deadwater Deep. No word was spoken and scarcely a sound was made. The surface of the water was disturbed for a moment with a few bubbles, and the cold-blooded crime was over.

Within an hour an old barge would discharge a ton or so of ballast over the exact spot—and the disappearance of Norman Conquest would be complete and utter—for no drags could then reach him, even if his sudden absence from Great Bardlow caused any police activity, which it was not likely to do. For Norman Conquest's movements were notoriously strange and uncertain!

His killers had left nothing to chance. Norman Conquest

was stark naked; every stitch of clothing, every single article had been removed from his person; even his wrist watch, with its secret band, and its precious saw-edged hidden blades! The sack was of mail-bag canvas, as tough as leather, secured at the top by a small wrought-iron ring and two padlocks. In the bottom of the bag, beneath Norman's crumpled form, was a solid slab of lead.

Down he went—slowly and inexorably towards the very bottom of Deadwater Deep. No movement from Norman—for he had not yet recovered from the effects of his injury. These people had acted with deadly, frightening speed. It was less than half an hour since he had been walking along the lane, blithely singing.

Appreciable seconds elapsed before the ice cold water percolated through the closely woven canvas; but when the water did do so it seemed to come with a rush, and the sudden douche had the expected effect.

"No, don't hit him again," Sangley had said, his refined face distorted with savage cruelty. "The cold water will bring him to life with a jerk. Let him suffer, the interfering rat! Hackenschmidt himself couldn't burst this canvas!"

A blunder—a truly colossal blunder where Norman Conquest was concerned! Give him one thread of life to cling to, and you gave him all he needed! Strip him to his bare skin and enclose him in a sack—and he still found it possible to laugh.

Only two seconds passed between the incident of Norman's recovery and the realization that he was for it. In such moments of acute peril, Norman Conquest was at his best. He possessed an extraordinary sixth sense which told him, in a zephyr fraction, just what brand of devilry he was up against.

As his brain cleared, he was aware of a deadly sense of suffocation and numbing cold. As he moved, he felt the confines of his canvas prison—and he felt his hands sliding on bare limbs. He was dropping to death in the river, and they had robbed him of gun, pocketknife, and everything!

They! He did not even know who "they" were! He had seen blurry, black figures on the dark road, but that was all. And he laughed. For they were wrong! They had not robbed him of everything! His right hand, almost without guidance from his brain, had instinctively shot under his left armpit. A quick, short tug, and a strip of flesh-coloured false skin came away!

The daring Desperado's last reserves!

The "pocket" was so shallow that there was no visible sign that it existed, and the false skin was such an exact

match that a powerful lens was needed to detect its presence. And in that pocket snuggled two trifles—a knife of incredible strength and keenness, and a flat file.

But even as Norman's fingers gripped the tiny knife, he knew that it was going to be a desperate gamble. The sense of suffocation was now well-nigh unbearable, for his canvas prison had taken him far down into the depths. The pressure was terrific. His ears were roaring, and his head was throbbing like the pounding of a steam hammer. One tiny slip, one fractional error, and he was doomed.

The numbness in his fingers was no help. Panic would have spelt disaster in letters a mile high. Only one thing could save him—a brain as cool as ice.

He got his knife into his fingers, steadied one hand with the other, and then, with apparently suicidal slowness and deliberateness, he guided the blade to the canvas. He inserted the point and felt it go slithering through the stout material with sweet and beautiful silkiness. Nothing short of an edge doubly as keen as that of a razor could have achieved such a miracle. With back pressed against the tightened canvas, with his feet tautening the rest of the sack, and one hand steadying the material, he drew the knife down, enlarging the original hole into a long slit. Hacking at the stuff would have been worse than useless. Only that sure, steady movement of his hand saved him from death.

Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have been unconscious before now. Norman Conquest was the hundredth man. In his time he had dived for pearls in the South Seas, and he had learned the knack of holding his breath until he was as efficient as any Kanaka. Added to this, he had his own incomparable physique and power of endurance.

Head first, he wormed his way out of the sack, and in a moment he shot free. But even in that glorious moment of salvation, with his brain slowly but surely numbing into unconsciousness, he did not make the fatal mistake of rising straight to the surface. Although he had an impression that an hour had passed since he had recovered consciousness, he knew that the period was actually less than three minutes. Up there, on the black surface of the river, there would be—watchers! Human devils gloating over the bubbles!

As he rose, therefore, he struck out with all his remaining strength, calling his last ounce of reserve and iron determination to his aid.

No fish, whether a denizen of the river or the ocean, had anything on Norman Conquest. Even when he was *in extremis*, as now, he gave a first-class impersonation of an otter, and his nude condition was all in his favour. Entirely unencum-

bered, he was able to swim with complete freedom.

Instinctively he knew that the surface was just above him. His lungs could hold out no longer. He allowed his head to break the water, but he did not give any gulping gasp as he felt the life-giving air pouring into his lungs. He made no more disturbance than a water rat, and having filled his lungs he silently dropped into the depths again. New life surged through him now; his brain cleared, and even the dull throbbing of his head decreased so much that he forgot it.

He continued to swim under water and more than once he felt the mud of the river bed. His progress was checked unexpectedly by contact with something hard, which struck his head with some violence. But it was not solid. He put up a hand and felt a steel wire, tautly stretched. Queer. Hanging onto the wire, he edged along it and then felt the cold steel plates of a vessel of some kind on his left.

Feeling carefully, he found that the taut wire was not attached to the outside plates, but entered a small hole. Slowly and silently he rose to the surface. The time he allowed the water to trickle from his eyes so that he could look about him. Silence brooded over the scene—except for a faint creak from a spot up the river. He saw a black smudge and recognized it as a punt containing men. It was moving away in the opposite direction. The vessel against which he clung like a limpet was a large sea-going, steel-hulled motor barge, now trimmed for river work. As far as he could judge, the vessel was empty and deserted.

Turning his head, he saw the shadowy outline of an old building, and he judged that he was in a lock. He verified this a moment later, when he spotted the lock gates. He had swum straight into it from the upper reach of the river. He judged that the lock was no longer in use. Like the old mill it had been superseded by more modern equipment elsewhere.

His legs were resting against the wire some feet under the surface. And now he felt a curious quivering of the wire. It was such a surprising factor that he silently slid under the surface and felt the wire with his hands. As he did so, he touched a thin cord alongside the wire, and then his fingers came in contact with a square object which was being slowly drawn along the wire and away from the barge!

Something seemed to explode in Norman's brain. With one fierce tug, he jerked the square object free from its attachments and in the same moment he dived cleanly. He went right beneath the barge, coming up silently on the other side. A few swift strokes, and he reached the moss-grown wall and pulled himself out. He expected to hear shouts and

to see moving figures. But there was nothing. The thing in his hands was a metal box, like a miniature safe.

"Somehow," murmured Norman, "I don't think this spot is particularly healthy."

He ran lithely across the meadow which adjoined the river. Once glance at the surrounding trees and hills had given him his direction. He avoided the lanes. He had no wish to be mistaken for a wandering nudist. Indeed, this problem of nudity was one which had to be seriously considered. Norman was as hardy an animal as ever breathed and he had no fear of evil consequences to his health. But no young man can wander about the Suffolk countryside in a state of stark nakedness and get away with it.

As he ran he heard the church clock of Great Bardlow striking the hour. He was curious. He had no idea how much time had elapsed. Two hours? Three hours? He listened to the strokes with intent interest.

Eight—nine—ten—— Then silence. Incredible! Only ten o'clock! And it had been nine-fifteen when he had left the Red Lion! The opposition believed in fast work, evidently.

"Not so good!" growled Norman. "Only ten o'clock! That means that plenty of people are still about. This is one hell of a pickle!"

And then a soft chuckle escaped him. The nearest residence, as far as he knew, was Bardlow Hall! There wasn't a chance in a thousand that Sir Hastings Trevor's household would have gone to bed at such an early hour. And it struck Norman that it was exceedingly fitting that he should obtain reserve clothing from such a source. As the thought crossed his mind, his eyes frosted over like chilled steel. He had no iota of proof, but his instinct was working overtime.

He had discovered an ugly bruise on his head, but this did not worry him. He had been bruised before and his head was acclimatized to this sort of thing. As he approached the grounds of the Hall, he found his thoughts drifting towards Primrose Trevor. He wondered what she would think. This was almost the exact time of the appointment and she would be waiting. It was an unforgivable sin, in Norman's view, to keep a young lady waiting, but he rightly came to the conclusion that he could hardly meet her in his present condition. And by the time he found something to wear, she would certainly have got fed up and gone off.

Strange that a man of Norman Conquest's experience and uncanny judgment of human character should have felt no tremor of suspicion! He pictured Primrose Trevor as waiting at the stile—anxious, worried, her frightened eyes searching up and down the road for the first sign of his coming.

She was there now, at this very minute, her ears tingling for his footfalls!

Never a thought that his fiendishly planned murder might have been engineered within that beautiful little head! Never a suspicion that the appointment at the stile had been a trap! Those thugs had obviously followed him from the village; they had found out which lane he was taking, and one of them had gone on in advance to take his place in the tree! Thus Norman Conquest dismissed the matter. Thus Norman Conquest was being gulled, like many a man before him, by the insidious wiles of a woman! That seemingly invincible armour of his was not without its flaw!

As his thoughts kept wandering towards the girl, he thrust them aside. This business of getting clothes was of major importance at the moment.

Reaching the rear wall of the Hall garden, he lightly vaulted up, hauled himself over, and dropped. Like a ghostly pale shadow, he flitted across lawns and along the well-kept paths. There were lights in some of the lower windows and lights in the top-floor windows. But no lights in between. The "quality" was still active, and some of the servants had gone to bed. Easy. The bedrooms he needed were empty.

Selecting a point where there was no lighted lower window near, he climbed the wall with the serene ease and lightness of Tarzan himself. The wall was smothered with age-old ivy, and the task was child's play. Above, he had seen a half-opened bedroom window. Before commencing to mount he had placed the little steel box behind a tree and now, sitting on the window sill, he carefully brushed his feet. They were only a little damp from his progress across the grass. His body, by this time, was bone dry, and the brisk activity had thoroughly warmed him.

His eyes, accustomed to the darkness, easily picked out a big, old-fashioned wardrobe as he padded silently across to the door and turned the key in the lock. There was a shaded bedside lamp. Coolly he switched it on. The light although confined, was almost dazzling after the darkness. He took three quick steps to the wardrobe and silently opened it.

Clothes—masculine clothes. Good, as far as it went. But a glance at the suits, which hung so neatly on their hangers, told him that they were miles too small for him. With his limited knowledge of the Trevor household, he nevertheless had no difficulty in identifying the wearer as Sangley, the private secretary.

Sangley! Inevitably, he remembered that baleful, malevolent backward glance of Sangley's, on the drive that morning. Just as inevitably, Norman thought of the dead Roper.

It was a train of thought that made the next action a dead-rock certainty. A pair of heavy golfing shoes lay on the floor of the wardrobe, and Norman picked them up and turned them over and examined the soles.

One glance was sufficient. On the edge of the right sole there was a little collection of oily dirt, black and sticky. It was Sangley who had made the "struggle marks" on the road—Sangley who had felled Roper with one murderous blow!

As Norman Conquest took the rearmost suit from its hook, after replacing the shoes, his brain was already formulating the moves he would make during the next half-hour. A soft chuckle came into his throat. With lightning speed he slid into the tweed sports suit. The legs and sleeves were comically short, but Norman was slim and he just made it. Except for an ominous tear as his broad shoulders got into the jacket, all was well. He put a hand up to ease the coat and there was a further tear; but he felt something in the inside pocket.

A little book. A soiled, shiny-covered black notebook. He glanced at the flyleaf. And there was Roper's bold signature! Norman's heart jumped as he flipped the pages with his thumb. Blank, except for the first few—and these were covered with nothing but pencilled figures, with dots here and there. A code of some kind! Norman's thoughts shot off at an angle.

Had he been getting Roper wrong all this time? Was Roper a diligent police officer, adopting Edgar Wallace-like stunts in his investigations? Or was he a member of the gang, who had been bumped for suspected treachery? One moment of clear thought and Norman was convinced that Roper's only "crime" had been to keep valuable information to himself. It was his secretive nature which had prompted him to write his notes in a code. A glance through Edgar Wallace's novels would probably provide the key.

Defly, Norman tore out the used pages and then laid the book down beside the shoes. Sweet William should find these things, but there was no reason why Sweet William should have the benefit of Roper's notes! If they contained anything informative, Norman wanted them.

There was a clock on the mantelpiece. Nine minutes past ten. The Desperado was as fast a worker as the opposition—and just a trifle faster. He had already proved that he was several moves ahead of them in any hazardous game. Switching off the lamp, he ran to the window and descended to the ground.

Before ten-thirty was chiming on the village clock, Norman

Conquest was in his own bedroom at the Red Lion, immaculately dressed and groomed, as only he knew how. Further, he had sent a messenger to inform Inspector Williams that he, Norman, would appreciate an immediate visit.

Getting into the Red Lion had been easy enough—after Norman had deftly avoided a few people in the village street. A quick hop over the end wall of the inn garden and a repetition of his climbing act—this time quite easy, for the bedroom window was almost within jumping distance.

Mr. Williams accepted the invitation with alacrity. He returned to the Red Lion with the messenger, and he found Norman Conquest in the private smoking room, leaning against the mantelpiece and looking exactly like a million dollars. Mr. Williams blinked painfully and uttered a protest.

"Damn it, Conquest, not at this hour of the evening!" he said sorrowfully. "An hour ago you looked respectable——"

"You should have seen me half an hour ago!" said Norman with a lilting chuckle.

"Where's the joke?" asked Williams sourly.

"Bill, you'd be surprised!" said Norman. "At a more appropriate time, I'll give you the low-down. Right now I want you to come with me to Bardlow Hall."

"To Bardlow Hall? What for?"

"I'm going to hand you Roper's murderer on a platter."

"What the hell——"

"During this last hour, while you've been guzzling whiskies and sodas, I've been busy," continued Norman, bending his head forward and revealing the ugly swelling for Mr. Williams' inspection. "No, Bill, don't ask any questions."

"What do you mean—don't ask any questions?" almost bawled Inspector Williams. "I've always known you to be half crazy, Conquest, but this is going too far! If you're suggesting that somebody at Bardlow Hall is guilty of killing Roper——"

"It's not a suggestion. Sweet William—it's a gift I'm placing right in your lap," interrupted Norman. "Go to Bardlow Hall and ask for Sangley, the secretary. Perhaps you saw him this morning? Have a look inside his wardrobe and you'll find oil-smearing golf shoes and—Sergeant Roper's notebook! I imagine that Sangley will have a sweet time explaining."

Incidentally, the Gay Desperado was looking forward to a sweet time of his own—when Sangley and Sir Hastings Trevor found him strolling elegantly into Bardlow Hall! Norman would be exceedingly interested in their reactions. That they believed him dead he had not the slightest flicker of doubt.

Chief Inspector Williams opened his mouth to say something caustic, and then closed it like a trap. Memory had come to his aid. He recalled how Norman Conquest had given him tips on other occasions—and they had never once been wrong. His mind throbbed and Norman could almost see the works going round. Mr. Williams achieved—for him—a record in quick decisions.

"I'll take a chance," he said grimly. "But, by God, if you're playing monkey tricks. . . ." He pulled himself up and swallowed hard. "Let's go."

He knew that this was no time for talking, but for action. Norman's car was outside, and they both got into it, and Norman had them streaking up to the Hall with zooming breathlessness. He did not want Mr. Williams to change his mind.

"This is all wrong, Conquest!" protested the inspector: "I haven't got a warrant and the evidence you spoke of isn't half good enough. I shall have the coat stripped off my back if I'm not careful. I can't afford to risk my pension. . . ."

"When you're after big game, Night Starvation, you can't afford to think about stripping coats. When it comes to stripping, I'm an expert," said Norman blithely. "If you weren't so young and innocent, I could tell you something, that would curdle all the oil in your hair roots. Sangley thinks he's above suspicion, and I'll bet you a thousand quid to a week's whack of your pension that he gives himself away."

"But think what it implies!" almost panted Williams, whose wits were branching out in all quarters. "If Sangley killed Roper, he must have known of Roper's infernally secret investigations. Is Sangley mixed up with that Launceston-Bevan job? Does he know anything about the Hotel Supreme job of two nights ago? Is he one of the heads of this fence racket?"

The very idea seemed so monstrous that Mr. Williams did not wait for any answers to his questions. They were whirling up the drive of the Hall, with the fine old country mansion in full sight.

"Stop!" panted the inspector. "You're mad, Conquest—and I'm worse for letting you bring me here! This man Sangley is a respectable private secretary, and——"

"You said you'd go through with it—and you're going through with it," interrupted Norman calmly, as he brought the car to a standstill just beyond the main steps. "Can't you get it into your thick head that Sangley might have had a purely personal reason for bumping Roper? Did I say he was mixed up with the fence racket? You want the best murderers, Bill—I have them!"

Norman had no wish for Inspector Williams to connect Sangley with the nation-wide robberies which were so alarmingly on the increase. Better to make him think that Sangley's quarrel with the sergeant had been a private one. Motive wasn't important in any case. Norman knew that Sangley was guilty, and he suspected that Sangley had attempted to take his—Norman's—life this evening. Sangley had to go. Norman could then concentrate on the men higher up.

With a firm hand, he propelled the protesting inspector to the front door. He pulled the bell and waited. Williams seemed to sense that there was no escape and he squared himself and set his jaw. The door opened and Dawes, the butler, stood there.

"Ah, serf!" said Norman cordially. "We meet again!"

The effect was highly instructive and entertaining. Dawes turned as white as a sheet and his jaw quivered so much that he could scarcely speak. He was looking at Norman Conquest as a man might look at a ghost. And Norman smiled happily.

"What the devil's the matter with you, man?" asked Mr. Williams tartly. "Tell Sir Hastings I would like to see him for a moment. Tell him it's important."

"Yeh-yeh-yes, sir!" stammered the butler.

But any further activity on his part was unnecessary. The inspector had used a loud voice and the hour was late. A door opened and Sir Hastings Trevor and his daughter came out to see what all the commotion was about. Norman Conquest lounged easily against the figure of Psyche, resting his hand in a most disrespectful manner on the lady's rear. He felt that he and Psyche had much in common that evening.

And Norman was watching—with sheer Belial joy.

He saw Sir Hastings come forward, with Primrose by his side and just a little in the rear. She was looking wonderful in a honey-coloured silk gown of exclusive but simple design. Sir Hastings suddenly checked, rather as though he had walked into an invisible brick wall. He was looking straight at Norman Conquest's smiling face, and his jaw, after coming almost unhitched, closed up like a trap. With a supreme effort, the man made a good recovery.

But Primrose! She was superb. She was incredibly incomparable. Norman had hoped that he would see her, and this was the main reason why he had urged Inspector Williams to make the outrageous visit. There was not a flicker of the girl's eyelids; not a twitch of her mouth or the slightest change of expression. Just surprise and a little suggestion of fear—that fear which always seemed to lurk by her side. It was an inestimable exhibition of matchless self-control—so perfect that even Norman Conquest's super-

sensitive faculties remained at "stop."

As the landowner came forward, he could not know that his discomfort was more than matched by Inspector Williams'.

"Sorry to intrude like this, sir," said the inspector thickly, as he felt a prodding finger in his back. "I'd like to see Mr. Sangley. It's important."

"My secretary?" said Sir Hastings in surprise. "He went up to his bedroom not a minute ago. What earthly reason can you have for wishing to see Sangley at this hour?"

"Plenty of reason, sir!" retorted Mr. Williams, taking refuge in a sudden curt gruffness. "I have reason to believe that Mr. Sangley can give me some vital information on the Roper murder!"

It was quite unintentional, but the inspector managed to infuse a sinister suggestiveness into his voice. He was still dazed by the thought that he had allowed Norman Conquest to pitchfork him into this appalling situation. When he saw Sangley, he would put a few vague questions and then apologize and get out. Then he would use all the words of his extensive vocabulary in one blast at Norman's head.

"Oh!" came a soft little cry from Primrose. "Dad! I was afraid that Mr. Sangley——" She broke off and clung to Sir Hastings' arm.

"What's that?" asked Mr. Williams, with a jump. "What were you afraid of, Miss Trevor?"

Her words had electrified him. But Sir Hastings, almost roughly, told her to go back into the drawing room and she obeyed. The landowner moved towards the stairs.

"If you want to see Sangley, you'd better come up to his room," he said gruffly. "If you can give me any hint of what all this means, though, I shall be obliged. You can't suspect Sangley of——"

"I rather think," drawled Norman Conquest, "that my pal would prefer to tackle brother Sangley without any delay."

"Yes, if you don't mind," said Mr. Williams.

As they started mounting the stairs, they could not guess that Primrose was acting like streaked lightning. She went to a corner of the drawing room where there appeared to be no door; but a door opened as though by magic and she vanished. A quick run up narrow stairs, a turn to the left, and she opened another door. She was in Sangley's bedroom, and she had not appeared on the landing.

Sangley was at the wardrobe. The door was open and he had a startled, frightened look on his face. He jumped as he heard the faint swish of the girl's gown. She had just ten seconds in which to act—or she might have paid some attention to the little object which the secretary held

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in his hand, and which an inexorable fate had placed there.

"You startled me, miss!" gasped the man. "I didn't expect to see you here. Somebody has been——"

With cool, cold-blooded precision, Primrose Trevor raised her gloved hand and pointed the muzzle of the automatic she held straight at Sangley's right temple. He did not even know what she was doing as she squeezed the trigger—and then it didn't matter.

As the report rang out, Sangley slumped to the floor. His fingers closed convulsively over—Roper's notebook! He held it in his left hand. His right hand was empty—until the girl thrust the automatic into his twitching grip and closed the fingers over the butt. A second later she ran lightly to the secret door and was gone.

Only in the nick of time!

Inspector Williams burst into the room like a whirlwind. They had heard the shot when they were halfway upstairs. Eloquent proof of the she-devil's speed! One look was sufficient for Williams.

"My God!" he shouted. "He's shot himself!"

Sir Hastings ran into the room. Norman Conquest stood on the landing, and his mind was filled with wonder. This was an unexpected twist! He found it hard to believe, even now, that Sangley, with no evidence that he was in danger, should have taken his own life. He heard a soft sound on the stairs and found Primrose running up. The impression he received was that she had just emerged from the drawing room after hearing the shot.

"What is it?" she asked tensely. "What was that bang?"

She halted, as though fearing to ascend further. From Sangley's bedroom came Williams' official voice:

"Look at this! Sergeant Roper's notebook in Sangley's hand! He must have seen me arriving and got panicky. And when he heard us coming upstairs——"

The inspector finished the sentence with a shrug. Here was all the proof he needed that he had got the murderer of Sergeant Roper. Mandeville Livingstone, the tramp, would be free within an hour.

Norman quickly descended to Primrose. There was something in the girl's frightened look which called out to every fibre in his being. Poor fool! He did not know that her hell's brain was nearly steaming from overwork. With that lightning decision which characterized her every action, she had killed Sangley. She had killed him because she knew he was going to be arrested—and it was too risky to let him get into the hands of the police!

And she was filled with a cold fury against Norman Con-

quest, who was undoubtedly responsible for this visit. His astounding coolness, his non-reference to his adventures, filled her with acute unease. She would need all her wiles to crush this daring young adventurer! Mercifully, he suspected nothing; he had no hint, even, that his assailants and would-be murderers had any connection with the Hall.

"Come outside—please!" she whispered softly.

They ran down the stairs, and she opened the door and they went down to the terrace. The cool night encompassed them and Norman could feel her soft, supple body pressing closely against his own. Her hands pressed urgently on his arms.

"Why didn't you come?" she asked, with a half sob.

"I was on my way but something happened," said Norman swiftly. "I can't tell you now——"

"But I know!" breathed the girl, and he felt a shudder pass through her slender frame. "It was Sangley. That was what I wanted to tell you! I've always been afraid of Sangley, and I knew that he hated poor Roper. I couldn't say anything to Father, because Father always trusted him so much."

"Well, it doesn't matter——"

Norman hardly knew what he was going to say. Her intoxicating nearness bewildered him. He could smell the delicate perfume of her hair as her head came close to his shoulder and her little hands crept upwards. He did not hear the faint purr of an approaching car, as it came along the winding drive.

For no reason at all he suddenly took the girl's head in both his hands, tilted her face upwards, and kissed her. And as he did so, the approaching car turned another bend, and the headlights revealed them with dazzling clarity.

And at the wheel of the car sat—Joy Everard!

Primrose gave a little frightened cry, and she tore herself away from Norman Conquest's arms and ran indoors. Norman felt a great anger within him. Who was this blundering chump who came barging up? He advanced grimly towards the car.

"It seems," came a clear and steady voice, "that I'm not wanted."

"Young Pixie!" yelled Norman.

No surge of guilt swept over him; only a feeling of extreme foolishness and irritation. He ran forward and looked into the calm, elfin face of his charming little partner.

"Damn it, Pixie, I told you not to come," he protested.

"You needn't take any notice of——"

"They told me at the Red Lion that I should find you

here, but they didn't tell me why," interrupted Joy, with an almost imperceptible quiver of her lips. "I can see that you were right, Desperado. It was silly of me to come."

Before he could speak she had let in the clutch, and the car went shooting along round the circular drive—back to the road. Norman Conquest cursed, but he had no means of knowing that Joy's eyes were nearly blinded with tears.

* * *

Chief Inspector Williams was a happy man that night. Sangley's suicide was sufficient proof of his guilt; the oil-stained shoes and the notebook were significant items of evidence. It was obvious that Sangley had faked the evidence against the tramp. Reluctantly, Sir Hastings and his daughter had admitted that Sangley had disliked Roper for weeks. There was a hint of some private quarrel between them, and the truth would never be known.

In a word, the unfortunate Williams was successfully side-tracked—and by Norman Conquest. Williams believed that Sangley had no connection with the nation-wide robberies. Norman Conquest knew that he had!

In his bedroom at the Red Lion, sometime after midnight, Norman was leisurely inspecting the contents of the little black box, which he had succeeded in forcing open after much hard work. It was a watertight box, cunningly and beautifully made.

And inside it—the entire proceeds of the recent Hotel Supreme burglary.

Found by Norman on its way along a wire from one of Sir Hastings Trevor's barges to a derelict watermill on Sir Hastings Trevor's property!

"Not a bad night's haul," drawled the Gay Desperado, his cigarette tilted at an angle which spelt danger. "I wonder what Sweet William would say if he could see this little lot? But I wonder a hell of a lot more what the opposition is thinking at this moment!"

Norman Conquest was a happy man, too, when he went to sleep that night. A third happy man was the whimsical Mr. Living-tone, who unexpectedly found himself as free as the air.

And in Clacton-on-Sea a tiny, pixie-faced girl lay in bed with dry eyes and a fighting tilt to her chin.

CHAPTER NINE

THE BATTLE OF HASTINGS

THE SUN was shining, birds were twittering, and an early

lawn mower was purring, as Norman Conquest strolled elegantly down the picturesque old staircase of the Red Lion. It was true that he had to contort his high, wide and handsome figure somewhat in order to negotiate the peculiarities of the staircase, but in spite of these disadvantages he continued to look elegant.

Humming gaily, he entered the mellow old coffee room, with its oak rafters and chintz-curtained casement windows. There was a tantalizing waft of hot coffee and grilling ham in the atmosphere of the hall, and the additional tang of shag tobacco befouling the coffee room was no improvement. The source of this minor gas attack was a shabby and wiry little man with a sun-tanned and twisted leathery face, who sat on the wide window seat.

"'Morning, guv'nor!" he said eagerly, jumping to his feet like a jack-in-the-box. "I've been waiting here since eight o'clock. You don't mind, do you, sir? I told the landlord you wouldn't mind, but he didn't want to let me in at first."

"That's the trouble with these landlords—no imagination," drawled Norman Conquest, as he took the little man's hand and gave it a firm grip. "So they sprung you, did they?"

"Sprung me, sir?"

"A term of American origin, which a man of your innocence would scarcely understand," explained Norman. "When did they dig you out of the deepest dungeon?"

Norman sat down on the window seat, lighted a cigarette, and pressed one on his shabby friend.

"But I've only just lit my pipe again, sir."

"That's why you've got to take the cigarette," said Norman firmly. "Pipes are all very well in their place, but before breakfast—no!"

The whimsical little tramp thrust his pipe into his pocket and again rejected the cigarette.

"I don't want to smoke at all, sir," he said, his voice husky. "All I want to do is to thank you for what you've done for me. That's why I'm here, sir. When a man's been locked up for a murder he never committed—and he knows there's a lot of black evidence against him—he feels kind of dazed when he's suddenly set loose. The police tell me that the real murderer shot himself, but I know I've got to thank you——"

"Skip it, Mandeville," murmured the Gay Desperado.

A neat and fresh-looking maid was coming into the room with the breakfast tray, and her eyes contained an unwonted sparkle, and her rosy cheeks were more than usually flushed. Norman could see that the girl was bubbling with unspoken words, but he did not encourage her. He merely ordered a

second breakfast and passed his own to the surprised tramp.

"Not likely, sir!" said Livingstone, almost shocked. "I'm not a bit hungry——"

"All the same, you're going to get outside of this breakfast, and I'm going to watch you do it," insisted Norman Conquest. "A man who has been in the jug, even if it's only for two or three days, knows how to appreciate a good meal. Not that the kitchen hands of this blighted inn can teach you anything about cooking."

He was well aware that Great Bardlow was seething with excitement from the effects of the double-barrelled blast which had hit the village this morning. The highly respectable and scholarly Mr. Sangley, secretary to Sir Hastings Trevor, of the Hall, had committed suicide when police officers had gone to arrest him for Roper's murder! There was ample proof that he was the killer and that he had deliberately faked the evidence against the unfortunate tramp.

"It was you who saved me, sir," insisted the little man, his eyes fixed on Norman Conquest with a kind of doglike devotion. "I don't forget how you came into my cell after you had fooled the inspector, and how——"

"Didn't I tell you to skip it?" interrupted Norman, glancing up from the morning paper, and idly turning a page. "You haven't eaten a thing."

"I—I was wondering, sir . . . I mean . . ."

"You mean you were wondering. So what?"

"I can't figure how you did it, sir," said the tramp huskily. "The police knew I'd quarrelled with Sergeant Roper, and they found bloodstains on my clothing and a big bludgeon in the ditch near my camp."

"And it turns out that the blighter who did the murky deed was one of the Knobs—or near-Knobs," nodded Norman. "But that's the way it goes, old lad. You can never tell. There are other surprising things——"

He broke off abruptly, and he stared at a picture in the newspaper with a dancing imp of mischief in his quartz-gray eyes and a lilting chuckle on his lips. He deftly tore out the reproduced photograph, folded it, and tucked it into his waistcoat pocket.

"If anybody ever tells you, pal, that there's no such thing as luck, don't you believe a word of it," said Norman blithely. "Two days ago Mr. Underwood B. Adams, the American millionaire, landed at Southampton, complete with his super-seventy Packard, and he's staying at the Dorchester. And what do you call that but luck?"

"You mean, you know the gentleman, sir?"

"Never saw him in my life. Never even heard of him

before."

"But I don't see——"

"Not now, friend, but later on you will," drawled Norman Conquest, as he lay back on the cushions of the window seat and half closed his eyes. "I wonder, Mandeville, if you ever heard of the Battle of Hastings?"

The little man stared, as well he might.

"Why, yes, sir, although my history's a bit rusty these days," he replied. "That was in the year ten-sixty, something when William the Conqueror invaded England."

"Fine! And who won this little mill?"

"Wasn't it the Normans, sir?"

"The Normans it was, and if I remember rightly, they put it well and truly across Harold and his huscarls, to say nothing of his archers and his men of the Fyrd," said Norman, with closed eyes. "I wonder if you'd like to hear a little story, brother?"

"Well, sir——"

"Pin your ears back and listen—because you're going to hear the story, whether you like it or not," said Norman, opening a corner of one eye and noting that the door was completely closed. "Now, I'm not going to mention names. Get that, Mandeville? No names."

"Yes, sir. No names."

"I'll merely mention, *en passant*, that my own name is Norman and that the wealthy and highly respected squire of this rural domain is Sir *Hastings* Trevor," continued the imperturbable young man, with the slightest tremor of one eyelid. "Do we connect, Brother Mandy?"

"No, gov'nor. I'm damned if I know what you're talking about—begging your pardon, sir——"

"You will," promised Norman smoothly. "And now, while you're champing the ham and washing it down with the liquid our worthy landlord humorously calls coffee, I'll get on with the fairy tale. Once upon a time," said Norman Conquest, "there was a bloke living in a big way—a kind of feudal baron, you understand—who had the respect of all the local tenantry and populace at large. This bloke—baron—had a charming daughter; a maiden of rare beauty and grace; a maiden of such surpassing willowiness and blue-eyed attractiveness that the sun faded and shrank in her presence. In a word, brother, a wow."

At this point Norman lost the thread of his story for a moment. His eyes were closed, but his mental vision was full of a picture of Primrose Trevor, with her frightened blue eyes, and her air of appealing tension. Almost imperceptibly, Norman's firm young jaw tightened and began to

look something like a chunk of pink granite. Then he relaxed and opened his eyes again.

"Included in the menage of this baron-bloke there was also a certain scribe or secretary," pursued Norman, slipping another smoke between his lips and tilting it at a rakish angle. "Now, this scribe was a pestilential blighter, who washed his hands in the air and had other obnoxious habits. For reasons of their own, these two blokes, the baron and his secretary, plotted to get rid of a local sheriff or sergeant, who had become a darned sight too inquisitive. Thus, it was arranged that the scribe should do the dirty deed, striking the sheriff down with a blunt instrument, and the baron should find the body lying on the turnpike hard by the baronial hall. So that no suspicion should be cast upon themselves, they splashed gore on the habit of a stranger who was sleeping peacefully in his tent—a stranger who, by chance, happened to be travelling in the land."

Mandeville Livingstone's eyes had been getting rounder and rounder during this surprising recital; and now his wind-hardened, leathery face was creased into a living question mark. His wits were as nimble as his limbs were wiry, and he needed only a mediocre imagination to know that Norman Conquest was accusing Sir Hastings Trevor of being involved in the brutal murder of Sergeant Roper. The little tramp had stopped eating and his jaw was slightly unhitched.

"Now, there happened to be a second stranger in the land—a goodly knight-errant who strolled into the scenario in an off-hand manner and saw the maiden of rare beauty already mentioned in our first spasm," continued Norman. "It did not take the far-seeing knight long to twig that the damsel was in a considerable spot of distress. It is well known, Brother Mandy, that knight-errants have no other purpose in life than that of assisting distressed maidens. So this laddie rallies round like hell and, by means of his own inimitable prowess, he digs up clues and things which satisfy the local constabulary that the stranger in the land is innocent, and that the scribe is the bloke who ought to do a spot of dangling. So off they buzz to the baronial hall, only to find that the scribe has made a large and ugly hole in his forehead, thereby defeating the ends of justice."

"Gord love us, guv'nor, you don't mean——"

"Wait, pal!" said Norman gently. "Let me finish. This knight-errant knows jolly well that the bold, bad baron is just as guilty as the aforesaid scribe—who may, or may not, have made a hole in himself. The knight-errant also knows that the damsel is still in distress, and he makes up his mind to linger secretly in the land and do a bit more rallying."

For this lad is of a deeply suspicious nature and has an inkling that at the back of the murder there is a racket, to say nothing of vast quantities of boodle."

"You can't mean what you're saying, guv'nor," panted Livingstone, half frightened. "They told me at the police station that it was a man named Sangley who killed Roper, but it's impossible to believe that Sir Hastings Trevor was——"

"Tut-tut!" broke in Norman languidly. "Didn't I make it quite clear that this is a fairy tale?"

"I know, sir, but——"

"Then let me finish, and don't keep butting in," said Norman severely. "Now I've lost the thread. Where was I? Ah, yes! I was telling you about the knight-errant. He comes to the conclusion that the local hostelry, where he is staying, might become a hot spot, so he decides to shift. He does shift, and he takes with him the stranger in the land who has escaped the gallows by a short head, and who has just been released from durance vile. The knight-errant engages this cheery little bloke as his personal servant because the fellow is passing good at cooking, especially over a camp fire. . . ."

This time the tramp would not be denied. He had leapt to his feet, his eyes full of wild excitement, and he clutched at Norman Conquest's arm.

"Don't go talking in that funny way no longer, sir," he begged. "You're offering me a job, ain't you?"

Norman sat up and looked at the little man with mild interest.

"Now, you know, Mandeville, that's not a bad idea!" he said, as though it had never occurred to him. "But what do you want with a job? I thought you revelled in the great open spaces? The sunshine and the showers by day, and the beetles and the spiders and the gnats by night?"

"I'd make a good servant, sir—honest I would," said the tramp earnestly. "If it wasn't for you, I'd still be in the cells, with a murder charge hanging over my head. I'm not so fond of the road as all that——"

"Better think carefully, laddie. Working for me is apt to be the same thing as sitting on a bomb."

"I'm not afraid of bombs!" said Livingstone stoutly.

Norman Conquest looked at the man critically and there was a twinkle in his eyes. He had thought very carefully before coming downstairs; he had been certain that his tramp friend would be waiting for him, to thank him. And the Desperado had been making plans for the immediate future which included a handyman. Whom could he trust more

than Livingstone, whose life he had probably saved? The little tramp was fairly oozing with honesty and gratitude. Norman had liked him from the first.

"Allowing for your contempt of bombs, there are other considerations," said the young man who was sometimes known as "1066." "I'm not respectable, Mandeville. Ask Sweet William. Mention my name to him and he'll give you an earful of sordid exploits——"

"I don't care, guv'nor," interrupted the other defiantly. "Besides you're only kidding."

"I'm not kidding, my friend, when I tell you that from now onwards the fun and frolics are going to get red hot, and that sundry septic blighters are liable to bump me off—or try to," said Norman deliberately. "If you like to attach yourself to me as odd man at a salary of five quid a week, with food and lodging found, we can call it a deal."

The tramp's jaw nearly bumped on the floor.

"Five quid, guv'nor!" he gasped incredulously.

"A couple of quid for your work, and three quid for the dangers attached to the job," answered Norman. "All fixed, eh? I think I hear the fairy footsteps of the serving wench. They must have had a bit of trouble killing the pig and curing the ham!"

While he was eating, the tramp with the strange name sat on the edge of his chair, watching him nervously, with a semi-dazed look in his eyes. He could not yet quite believe that he was really free; and as for this job which Norman had offered him in such a curious way, the very thought of it left him mentally bludgeoned.

The meal over, Norman rose briskly to his feet.

"And now, serf, we depart," he said. "You'll find my suitcase at the bottom of the stairs. Glue yourself onto it and wait for me outside."

"Yessir!" said Livingstone breathlessly.

When Norman strolled out into the sunshine a few minutes later, after settling his bill, he found the ex-tramp gazing up into the blue of the heavens and watching the evolutions of a fast fighter plane which looked—and sounded—rather like an angry hornet. Norman was subconsciously aware that he had heard the plane for a quite a while. It had evidently been circling the village of Great Bardlow and giving the populace a free display of aerobatics.

"And so," said Norman Conquest, "to London."

He waved a hand towards the broad village street and they started walking. Livingstone gathered the impression that they were to walk all the way; but Norman's destination was the village garage, some little way down the street, where his

rakish Hispano roadster was housed.

"Without wishing to be carping or critical, Brother Mandy, I rather think you can do with a shave and a brush-up," observed Norman as they walked. "But that'll do when we get to London. You can also do with a new outfit of clothes, and I know just the spot where they can fit you out with two of everything in next to no time."

Livingstone started to make some reply, but his voice was almost drowned in the screaming roar of the lone flier's plane as it came straight down over the village street in a terrifying power dive. Norman Conquest had not given a thought to the plane, but now he halted in the road and stared up into the sky, shading his eyes with a supple hand.

"The fellow's as crazy as a coot!" he muttered.

He could only just see the plane against the sun. It seemed to be diving straight down at him, and other people in the street had halted on the grass-edged pavements and were looking up. Shop-keepers were dashing to their doors.

"My God!"

The words zipped out of Norman's teeth like flashes of electricity. There was something so ominous, so sinister, in the plane's power dive that the Desperado's sixth sense, usually one of his best pals, whispered an urgent message right inside his brain. He knew, without knowing why he knew, that death was at his elbow.

Zurrrrrrrrrrh!

Above the terrific roar of the plane's engine, as it came right down low, there burst out a hacking splutter of machine-gun fire. Norman saw little puffs of dust in the road not fifty feet ahead.

Bullets! Puffs of death!

CHAPTER TEN

THE FUN CONTINUES

NORMAN CONQUEST knew in a zephyr flicker of a second that if he remained still he would become permanently still. His companion, the little ex-tramp, was paralyzed with surprise and bewilderment.

The machine-gun bullets sprayed on the road in a deadly barrage, and the almost uncanny skill of the mystery flier was demonstrated by the fact that the bullets endangered nobody but the pair in the middle of the road. As they spattered viciously into the macadam, Norman grabbed at Livingstone's arm and gave the man a yank which lifted him clean off

the ground. They both went sprawling in the dust and rolled over and over behind the concrete telephone booth, which was the only modern note in that rustic setting.

With a perfectly devilish thunder of noise, the plane flattened out when it was only eighty feet from the road, and the glasswork of the telephone booth was shattered into fragments. With engine sending out a yelling scream of power, the little plane went zooming like a rocket into the sky. And the ground, which Norman Conquest and Livingstone had occupied a bare two seconds earlier, was scored with ugly pockmarks. Dust still drifted in the sunshine.

"Well, well, well!" drawled Norman Conquest, as he sat up and stared into the sky at the fast disappearing plane. "What a pilot! I'll bet he's seen service on the Spanish battlefields! It's not the first time he's machine gunned a road—not by a jugful!"

He noted that the plane was a superspeed single-seater, of the interceptor fighter type, black all over, with no regulation identification marks. It was tearing off into the sky at a speed of anything between three hundred and four hundred miles an hour. Almost in a moment it had become a mere speck, and the sound of its engine was dwindling into a rhythmic throb.

"Gord love us, guv'nor, what happened?" gasped Livingstone, blinking and rubbing his shoulder.

"Nothing happened, brother—at least, nothing much," replied Norman. "Didn't I tell you that the vicinity of the Red Lion might become scorching hot? Do you still want to take the job?"

"More than ever, sir," replied the little man promptly.

"If you had made any other answer, henchman, I should have been disappointed," said Norman, dusting himself down. "Sorry I nearly dislocated your shoulder, but I thought you would prefer that to an assortment of bullets in your vitals."

He knew, without an atom of real proof, that the murder plane had been sent by the opposition. Sir Hastings Trevor was afraid that Norman knew too much. Hence the attentions of the lone flier, who had apparently been circling over Great Bardlow until he spotted his intended victim. He must have known that Norman would emerge sooner or later from the Red Lion. And it was impossible for anybody to connect the attack with the wealthy squire of Bardlow Hall. By this time the plane was hurtling like a meteor to its secret base, probably somewhere on the Continent.

The organization was even bigger than the Gay Desperado had imagined—and he knew that it was big. The only reaction from this thought was a blaze of hell-for-leather fire

in Norman Conquest's eyes, such as might enter those of an old war horse at the sound of the bugle.

"Hey! What the hell——"

Norman turned. Chief Inspector Williams was among those present.

"Morning, Bill," greeted Norman genially. "Lovely morning! Except for the little shower we just had——"

"Why the devil you weren't killed is more than I can imagine," interrupted the usually calm and placid Scotland Yard man. "I've never seen anybody move so quickly in all my life."

"I only moved more quickly on one occasion," said Norman reminiscently. "I was in Peru at the time and——"

"Damn Peru!" exploded Mr. Williams, his apple cheeks red with excitement and shiny with perspiration. "Do you know that that blasted fool might have killed a dozen people? You're a public menace, Conquest!"

"If you're going to blame me——"

"I blame you because you attract trouble like bad meat attracts blowflies——"

"Hard words, Bill!" sighed Norman. "I've been called many nasty things in my time, but I rather draw the line at bad meat."

By this time Inspector Marshall had arrived on the scene, to say nothing of half the population of Great Bardlow. Norman coolly caught Williams by the arm and drew him out of the crush, followed by the awed gaze of the throng.

"If you think I have the faintest idea who engineered the little game of five minutes ago, Sweet William, you're right off the rails. But you needn't worry. I'm clearing out of the village this morning. I like a rest cure in the country as well as anybody, but now that Livingstone is out of the jug——"

"What's he doing with you?"

"My new valet," explained Norman blandly.

"Your—*what!*" blurted the inspector, turning and giving the shabby tramp a hard stare. "Listen, my man! You don't seem to know what you're taking on! I'd rather be valet to an active volcano than to Conquest!"

"No reason why I shouldn't have the job if I want it, is there, sir?" demanded Livingstone defiantly. "If it wasn't for Mr. Conquest, you would still have me locked up."

Mr. Williams started.

"H'm! Well, don't say I didn't warn you," he said gruffly, deeming it advisable to change the subject. "I wanted to have a word with you, Conquest, and the thing that happened a few minutes ago doesn't make me feel any

the more comfortable. I know damned well that your interest in this district wasn't confined to helping Livingstone."

"Your trouble, Bill, is that you've got an imagination," drawled Norman. "No copper should have an imagination. It puts ideas into his head. What makes you think I can have any interest in a neck of the woods like this? I'm off to London at once, taking Popeye with me."

The inspector's look nearly bored holes through him. Mr. Williams himself was returning to London later on in the morning, after he had cleared up a few details with the coroner. And when Norman Conquest glibly said that he was leaving the district, Mr. Williams knew enough about him to suspect that he was planning to do nothing of the sort.

Before he could make any comment, however, Norman gave him a cheery wave and was gone. For some moments the little ex-tramp was silent, and then he gave voice.

"You're a cool card, guv'nor, and no mistake," he ejaculated. "I'm still feeling shaky all over. Not with fright, or anything like that. Just the shock, I suppose. I mean, them bullets spattering on the road, right in front of us——"

"After you've been with me for a bit, slave, you'll get so used to shocks that you'll bear a close resemblance to an Egyptian mummy—always providing, of course, that you live that long," said Norman comfortingly. "Admittedly the neighbourhood is poisonous, but when we come back tonight we shall be well prepared for any brand of trouble that happens along."

They reached the garage, and a couple of minutes later the silver-gray Hispano Suiza was purring out of the village. Norman was not deceived by the balmy sunshine and the tranquil surroundings. But he had little fear that the opposition would openly attack him. The risks were too great. That onslaught from the sky had been safe because the perpetrator of it could not be identified. And it was not likely to be repeated.

They were only half a mile out of the village when they saw a neat little two-seater gliding down the road towards them. A girl sat at the wheel—a fair-haired, blue-eyed slip of a girl in a delightful summery frock. Hatless, her wavy blonde hair was floating in the breeze and shimmering like spun gold. She waved as she recognized Norman and applied her brakes.

"The damsel in distress, sir?" whispered Livingstone shyly.

"And, oh boy, what a damsel!" nodded Norman.

It occasioned him some surprise to feel his heart thumping

against his ribs as he pulled up. The very sight of Primrose Trevor did things to him. Queer things. She was the only person in the world who had ever ruffled his calm serenity.

"Was there a crash?" asked Primrose breathlessly.

"You mean that plane? No."

"From the Hall it looked exactly as though the machine had dived straight down into the village," said the girl.

"Father said he heard it zoom up again, but we couldn't see anything because of the trees."

"It was only some ass playing games."

"You mean—somebody trying to kill you?" whispered Primrose, her frightened eyes looking appealingly into his.

"Oh, why do you deceive me?" Her glance caught Norman's suitcases and she gave a little cry. "You're not going away, are you?"

It was almost a sob of despair, and the girl did not seem to mind the presence of Livingstone. The very knowledge that Norman was going away appeared to rob her of all restraint.

"If you can keep a secret, sweet lady, I'll whisper that this journey is only a blind," said Norman Conquest swiftly.

"You'll be seeing me again soon—and that's a promise."

Her eyes were liquid pools of gratitude.

"Thank you!" she breathed, and drove on.

But she did not drive far. She slowed to a crawl after rounding the first bend, and over the hedge tops she saw Norman's Hispano speeding away. With expert skill the girl reversed into a gateway and then returned to Bardlow Hall. The fine old country house had never looked more charming than it did on this sunny morning. The stately trees were full of fresh green leaves, and the well-kept flower beds blazed with colour. The lawns, on one of which a green-aproned man was at work with a motor mower, were just silky carpets of freshness.

Jumping nimbly out of the two-seater on the terrace, Primrose ran indoors and met her father just inside the spacious lounge hall. There was an inquiring, anxious light in Sir Hastings Trevor's eyes.

"Well?"

"You were right, Dad," said the girl laughingly. "All this excitement over nothing. It was only some ass doing stunts over the village. There wasn't a crash at all."

"You sound disappointed," said Sir Hastings dryly.

They went into the library, a perfect picture of a wealthy country squire and his pretty daughter. But a startling transformation came over them as soon as the girl had closed the soundproof door. As though an invisible and terrible wand

had been waved, Primrose Trevor seemed to gain inches on her height, and her appealingly beautiful face became hard and cruel and vicious; the softness of her eyes faded away until they were raging pools of fury.

"That fool of a Marietz bungled the whole thing!" she said, her voice low and devilish.

"But how do you know? You haven't had time——"

"How do I know?" snapped the girl. "The first man I meet on the road is Conquest himself!"

"My God!"

"Unharméd—unscratched—and not a word from him about the machine gunning!" continued Primrose, her breasts rising and falling with the boiling rage within her. "I could have killed him as he sat there!"

"You don't think he—suspects?"

"He suspects you, just as he suspected Sangley," said the girl swiftly. "We've got to thank Conquest for all this trouble. Left alone, the police would have built up their case against the tramp and hanged him—just as we planned."

"It was a mistake to kill Roper——"

Sir Hastings broke off as the basilisk glare of his daughter's eyes chilled his blood.

"Roper had discovered too much, and he had to go," said Primrose Trevor deliberately. "Our method of dealing with him was perfectly satisfactory. The one factor which upset all our calculations was the intervention of this fellow, Conquest. Make no mistake, he's dangerous—as dangerous as hell! I'd rather have the whole of Scotland Yard's Big Five nosing about Bardlow Hall than Norman Conquest. Our one ray of hope is that he believes in me; he trusts me; he thinks I'm a frail and innocent child caught in crime's entangling meshes." Her voice was full of mockery, and a sneer distorted the beautiful mouth. "He was fool enough to tell me that he's coming back."

"But he mustn't come back," said Sir Hastings in alarm. "How can you be so sure that he trusts you? If he's as clever as you say——"

"He's clever—but not as clever as I am," interrupted Primrose Trevor coldly. "Do you think I don't know when I've got my man on the hook? But you're right, just the same. He mustn't come back, and it's better that an 'accident' should happen to him as far from here as possible. Luckily, I arranged the second string."

She went to the desk and ignored the ordinary telephone. Opening a drawer, she touched a hidden catch and disclosed a narrow cavity containing a telephone receiver of such slimness that it looked unreal. But a thin, uncannily attenu-

ated voice at once answered. Let the police have what suspicions they may against the occupants of Bardlow Hall, but they could never tap this phone wire!

"Listen, Nash!" said Primrose, her voice so different from her normal tones that she sounded like another person. "Plan No. 1 has failed. You'll be needed. Watch for a silver-gray Hispano Suiza, driven by a tall, well-dressed, good-looking young man, and accompanied by a wizened little fellow who looks like a tramp. This car will be passing Colchester very shortly. Follow it, and when you get near London—act. *Plan No. 2 must not fail!*"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE MATE OF THE "NANCY LEE"

COLCHESTER is a charming enough little town, but Norman Conquest saw little of it as he sailed serenely along the by-pass road to Lexden. Certainly, he took no particular notice of the shabby old Renault saloon which was parked in such a position that the by-pass exit was in full view, and which followed behind the Hispano as the latter joined up with the main London road.

If Norman had not been in a particularly exuberant mood, he might have missed seeing the Renault altogether. It was morning; the sun was shining, and there were plenty of cars on the road. The usually alert "1066" was quite satisfied in his own mind that the opposition would not do anything foolish or drastic in full daylight. The poor chump was lounging behind the wheel of the Hispano, thinking of Primrose Trevor. What the girl had told her father about hooking was the real McCoy. Norman Conquest, the young adventurer who had often boasted that he could instinctively smell a crook at a mile range, had detected only a sweet fragrance in Primrose's presence; a fragrance which had gassed him more or less into a condition of semi-imbecile complacency. Which only proves that man, in spite of his cockeyed assumption of superiority, is just a hunk of jellified putty in the hands of a clever woman. Admittedly, Norman had knocked about the world so much that he was better able to judge his fellow humans than an average man; but a woman like Primrose Trevor was a new one on him. No doubt Lucrezia Borgia's boy friends had made saps of themselves in just the same way. When a girl possesses a face like an angel and a soul like a gallon of nitroglycerine, men are apt to turn into goofs—and, later, into corpses.

But we must not forget Norman Conquest's exuberant mood, for this was the core, the hub, of the situation. Norman was in no particular hurry, and in such circumstances he was generally a law-abiding motorist. But something in the morning air took hold of him, and the knowledge that he had speed under the toe of his right foot proved irresistible. He saw a straight, long stretch of empty road and he grinned.

"Hold your eyebrows, Brother Mandy," he murmured.

Mandeville Livingstone preferred to hold the sides of the door, and he did this with both hands. The powerful Hispano surged forward like a suddenly unleashed greyhound, and the way in which the speedometer needle rocketed from forty to seventy was something that had to be seen to be believed.

"Gord!" said Mandeville Livingstone.

"Like it?" laughed Norman.

"No, guv'nor, I'm blowed if I do!"

"It'll grow on you in time and——"

As Norman was speaking he glanced quite automatically into the rear mirror; and somehow he lost the thread of his remark. The yeasty feeling was quickly succeeded by a return of his more customary razor-edged alertness. Yet he saw nothing much in the rear mirror to occasion this change. A shabby-looking, maroon-coloured saloon was on the road, several hundred yards behind.

The whole point was—*it shouldn't have been there!*

Before indulging in the burst of speed, and while noting that the road ahead was empty, Norman had casually glanced into the rear mirror and had seen the other car, which he recognized as a vintage Renault. But now he was doing over seventy miles an hour and the Renault was still all present and correct!

"Funny!" said Norman Conquest softly. "In fact, Mandeville, damned funny!"

The ex-tramp, failing to understand the remark, made no answer. He was, in fact, gazing glassily at the rear of a six-wheel lorry which they were about to overtake. There was other traffic on the road now and Mandeville was wondering just how deep the ditch was, and whether he would fall into it, or sail right over the top.

But he need not have worried. Norman had seen the lorry, and the Hispano's brakes were in first-rate condition. The dizzy speed rapidly decreased, and the silver-gray car was travelling very sedately as it overtook the truck and then continued on its way. When Norman glanced into the rear mirror again, the old Renault was still in view.

A mile or two farther on, after passing through Witham, he repeated the performance. He was sure that the Renault

was tailing him, but he had to be doubly sure. Up went the speed, soaring again into the seventies, and after hurtling like a meteor round a bend Norman braked suddenly, nearly causing the unfortunate Livingstone to take a header through the windscreen. Norman did not look round, but he kept one eye glued to the rear mirror. Sure enough, the Renault came blinding round the bend, its tires only touching the road in places, and it amused the Gay Desperado to see the old car's antics as the driver trod on the brake in order to save himself from overtaking.

"Well, now we know," drawled Norman contentedly.

His hell-for-leather smile was of the old fighting brand. He knew just what he had to do.

"Quite possibly, Popeye, you are wondering why we've been having these games," he continued. "I'll tell you. Don't look round, but some little way behind us there is an ancient twelve-horse Renault saloon. When we go fast, the Renault goes fast. When we go slow, the Renault goes slow. Very fishy, Mandeville—and very suggestive."

"You mean, we're being follored, sir?" asked the little man hoarsely.

"Just that," nodded Norman. "And greatly as I respect French engineering, I know darned well that no twelve-horse Renault engine could do what this old bus has been doing. She's packing about a hundred horses under that bonnet of hers, or I'm an 'L' driver."

"If you ask me, guv'nor," said Livingstone, "you *are* an 'ell driver! "

A little way farther on there was a quiet, leafy side lane, and Norman unexpectedly turned down it. It was so narrow that no two cars could pass, and Norman took chances as he sped along at over forty. Twin lights of wicked mischief sparkled in his eyes as he noted that the Renault was still on the job.

"I'll bet this has given our pal something to think about," chuckled the Desperado. "Good! The road's getting wider. Hold everything, Brother Mandy! "

With uncanny skill he whipped the Hispano into an open gateway which unexpectedly revealed itself. With a bare inch to spare on either side, the car got through and then snaked behind the cover of the high hedge. It was only a matter of seconds before the old Renault came surging along, to shoot past like a brownish red blur.

"My opinion of the opposition begins to sag badly in the middle," murmured Norman, as he sent his car round in a wide circle and shot out into the road again. "If they think they can catch me with these hoary old stunts, they must be

living in the dim ages of the past."

He trod on the accelerator pedal, and Mandeville Livingstone's hair—what there was of it—rose straight on end and wiggled at the tips as the Hispano rocked and roared down the narrow road.

"Glad we're having this little binge," bawled Norman, above the rush of the wind. "You'll have to get used to this sort of thing sooner or later, serf!"

He sounded the electric horn with devastating effect. The old Renault saloon was right ahead and going fairly slowly—the driver evidently nonplussed. He pulled over jerkily and Norman Conquest shot past. But the Hispano's brakes were already being applied, and the silver-gray monster ended up broadside across the road, blocking it completely.

"And what," asked Norman Conquest, "is the big idea?"

The driver of the Renault, who had pulled up abruptly in order to avoid a collision, blinked. He had not seen Norman get out of the driving seat or run across. It seemed to him that the lithe, immaculate figure had materialized out of the thin air. His driving door was open, and Norman was leaning against it and lighting a cigarette.

"I—don't—know—what you mean," said the man jerikly.

He was a roughish-looking customer, and Norman could see that his hairy wrists, as his hands rested on the driving wheel, were tattooed. His nose, probably the pride of his mother during childhood, was nobody's pride now, having been broken in several places. Evidently a man who liked his Saturday night fight.

"I gathered, friend," said Norman politely, "that you were anxious to overtake me. Well, here I am. What can I do for you? Or was it your intention to do for me?"

"You damned young fool!" blustered the man, striving to conceal his confusion behind a sudden burst of anger. "You might have killed me! Shoving your car across the road like that! I don't know what the hell you're talking about!"

"Not good enough, palsy-walsy," said Norman, shaking his head, and insinuating a hand against the other's armpit. "What is this nasty bulge? An old war wound?"

Like a snake, his hand was inside the man's jacket before he could even guess what was happening. And a split second later Norman Conquest was inspecting a beautiful new automatic pistol.

"Worth twenty-five quid of anybody's money," said Norman, slipping the weapon into his pocket. "Now we can talk like—Oh, so you'd rather not talk? You want to fight? That suits me too!"

The man had suddenly lashed out with a clenched fist at Norman's face, but the face wasn't there. The next moment the man literally flung himself at Norman, and they went reeling across the sunlit lane, locked in one another's arms. The man was frantic with panic for he could clearly see that "Plan No. 2" was halfway on its journey west.

"I'm rather particular about those whom I fight," said Norman Conquest gaily, as he gave his body a lithe twist and freed himself from the other's grip. "Besides, I'm in a hurry."

Crash!

It was rather a pity that Tommy Farr was not on the spot to witness the pile-driving right which Norman drove into his opponent's face. Tommy would have admired it. The man did not utter a sound; he just shot through the air with the greatest of ease and landed in the hedge, playing dead very successfully.

"Gord!" said Mandeville Livingstone, awed.

"We can't be bothered with small fry like this," said Norman, as he deftly went through the unconscious man's pockets. "What have we here?" He turned over a wallet, a grubby letter, and a few other prizes. "A second officer's certificate. So our friend's name is Edward Nash, and he's the mate of the good ship *Nancy Lee*—in other words, a motor barge. That's what it says on this—A motor barge!" Norman's eyes danced with sudden understanding. "Shall I tell you what, Brother Mandy? I'll bet you the Crown jewels to a pint of bitter that the *Nancy Lee* is one of Sir Hastings Trevor's ocean-going barges, engaged in carrying wheat to his up-river flour mills! Wheat, did I say? I wonder!"

He looked at the grubby letter. It carried no address, but it bore the previous day's date and was signed "Flossie."

"It seems that Romeo has been getting into trouble with his girl friend," remarked Norman, as his eyes danced over the letter. "Listen to this, Mandeville: 'If you're not on board Tuesday night at ten there'll be trouble. You needn't think you can dodge me this time, Ned! And if I ever see you with that fancy-Cissie again——' Dear, dear!" Norman tut-tutted and clicked his tongue. "I'm afraid you're too young to hear the rest, Mandeville. It's rather a wonder the paper doesn't burst into flames!"

He noted the address on the envelope: "Mr. Edward Nash, c-o Swinton's Wharf, Rotherhithe." It was a piece of information which was likely to be very useful. None of the man's other possessions were of interest—cigarettes, a pipe, shag tobacco, matches, loose change, and so on.

Norman replaced everything just as he had found it, with the exception of the automatic. Then he strolled across to the Renault and lifted the engine cover.

"Gather round and look, folks," grinned Norman. "Did you ever see a prettier picture?"

The engine which reposed under that shabby cover was a six-cylinder power unit which had obviously been borrowed straight from a Brooklands racer—small, compact, but oozing with super-charged energy. Norman leaned over and flooded the carburettor until the petrol was swilling over the crank-case and steering unit. He borrowed a match from Mandeville Livingstone and wedged the carburettor needle so that it continued flooding.

"What's that for, guv'nor," asked the man, in wonder.

"I don't think this car is quite legal, comrade," replied Norman Conquest, with a severe note in his voice. "On that license—the one on the windscreen—it distinctly gives the horsepower as 12.1. Somebody has been swindling the government out of its ill-gotten revenue, and I think we ought to do something about it. Like this."

He gave Livingstone a push, stood back himself, and threw a lighted match onto the flooded engine. There was a terrific burst of flame, accompanied by an ominous roar. Edward Nash was at this moment extricating himself from the hedge, and the sight of the flames acted on him like a pailful of cold water.

"Hi!" he yelled, staggering forward.

"I'm glad you've come to life, brother: you've saved me the trouble of carrying you to safety," said Norman, as he ran lightly to his Hispano. "This ought to hold you for a bit. I strongly object to being followed by disguised racing cars."

The fire was increasing with terrific intensity, spreading rapidly and sending flames twenty feet into the air, until the neighbouring tree branches began to crackle and frizzle. Norman chuckled as he drove away. He glanced back. Nash, after standing as though stricken for some seconds, was running madly in the opposite direction as though demons were at his heels.

"Palsy-walsy doesn't want to be identified as the owner of the car if anybody else comes along," drawled Norman, as he settled back comfortably in the seat. "I think we can now jog along in a carefree and——"

His words were interrupted by an ear-splitting explosion. He trod on everything and stared round—just in time to see fragments of the old Renault descending in a shower over the meadows. Rising into the sunlit air was a cloud of curiously

blackish-green smoke. Norman turned and looked at Mandeville Livingstone and his ears were ringing.

"Shall I tell you something, henchman?"

"The blooming car exploded, sir!"

"And how!" agreed Norman, nodding. "But I don't think you quite get it. I looked through the car, but as far as I could see it was empty. No exploding petrol tank would give that little display of fireworks! Hidden somewhere on the car there was a bomb of sorts!"

"A bub-bomb, guv'nor?"

"Not a bub-bomb—a bomb," corrected Norman Conquest. "And that bomb, my unshaven Mandeville, was intended for us and especially for me. Just how the dose was going to be administered doesn't matter. It hasn't harmed anybody except a few stray earwigs and an earthworm or two. Didn't I tell you that you might as well become valet to a powder magazine?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

JOY IN THE ARENA

SIR HASTINGS TREVOR, sitting in his library at Bardlow Hall, inspected his unevenly burning cigar, cursed, and crushed it into an ash tray.

"For God's sake, Primrose, don't fidget like that!" he said harshly. "My nerves can stand so much, but no more!"

His daughter treated the remark with the contempt it deserved. Sir Hastings was the one who was fidgeting; he had been fidgeting solidly for an hour. All the trim, graceful girl was doing was to sit in one of the big easy-chairs and manicure her nails.

"By this time, Conquest ought to be in London," went on Trevor, looking at his watch. "Nash should have acted before now. Of course, he's got to reach one of our secret control points before he can phone . . . Yes, of course. There's hardly been time. But this damned wait is killing me!"

He rose to his feet and paced up and down. Looking at the pair, the father and daughter, an onlooker would have had no difficulty in recognizing the one who possessed the controlling brain. In this soundproof room, with windows through which no outsider could see, it was possible for the man and the girl to relax—to throw off their mask of pretence.

The man who called himself Sir Hastings Trevor was normally dignified and aristocratic. His hard, cruel eyes told of

the clever and cunning brain behind them. Very few criminals in English history had attained the degree of organizing ability possessed by this ordinarily respectable-looking country squire. But his cleverness, his skill, his bump of crookedness were as nothing compared to the powers of his daughter.

Primrose Trevor was a phenomenon; a woman in fifty millions; the type of cold-blooded, calculating female criminal who occurs only once in a century. Nature had endowed her with a brain far cleverer than that of any male criminal of the age, and a beauty so devastatingly enchanting that all who came in contact with her were held as though by a spell. In Great Bardlow she was loved by all, from the elderly vicar and his good lady down to the grubbiest kiddy. It is doubtful if history could produce a better example of a female Jekyll and Hyde.

"I don't like it, Primrose," said her father, almost plaintively. "I'm not sure that you're wise in acting so drastically. That plane this morning——"

"Any other man but Conquest would have been killed," interrupted the girl composedly. "The plane cannot possibly be connected with us. And if you don't think we need to act drastically, let me remind you of what Conquest has done."

"I know—I know."

"He caused the police to suspect Sangley, and when Sangley was in danger of being arrested I had to shoot him," continued Primrose, turning slightly so that she could inspect the nail of her little finger in a better light. "Sangley was a valuable man and we can ill afford to lose him. We seized Conquest so cleverly that he never knew the identity of his assailants; we stripped him to the skin, placed him in a weighted canvas sack, and dropped him to the bottom of the river. Yet, within an hour, he was knocking at our front door, as cool and immaculate as ever."

Sir Hastings sweated.

"I can't understand it," he said hoarsely. "How in the name of hell did Conquest escape?"

"It's not important to know how he escaped," retorted the girl. "What is important is this: what became of the diamonds and rubies, the proceeds of the Hotel Supreme job, which disappeared at the very hour Conquest was supposed to be drowning? Every minute that man lives we're in danger. That fool of a Roper knew practically nothing, and we thought it advisable to kill him. Conquest knows a great deal more, and it's lucky for us he's the kind of man who keeps things to himself. We're the very type of people he delights in attacking—for profit. Have you forgotten what he did to Mortimer and to Glanford? Have you forgotten Count Rurik

Voegler? Where are they now? And Norman Conquest is setting to work with us *just as he set to work with them!*"

She laughed softly, and her father looked at her with a sense of wonder which never staled. He had never been afraid of a man in all his life, but he was mortally afraid of Primrose.

"Thank God, we have one advantage," continued the girl, patting her hair and inspecting her beautiful face in a little compact mirror. "In spite of his cleverness—and, remember, he's the cleverest man we've ever tackled—he thinks I'm the innocent victim of a wicked father. In his eyes, Dad, you're the Big Bad Wolf. I'm Little Red Riding Hood." She sighed a little wistfully. "I might have had quite a lot of fun with Conquest."

Something inside the desk began to make a little clicking noise, and one of the handsome inkwells glowed with an intermittent orange fire. Primrose crossed quickly to the desk and took out the secret telephone.

"It's Nash, boss!" came a thin, frantic voice. "He got away!"

"He did—what?" said the girl ominously.

"It wasn't my fault!" bleated Nash. "It's a wonder I'm alive! He knocked me cold and set fire to the car, and the bomb exploded and the car's in a million bits."

As he babbled out the details of his sorry story, the girl's face set in a cold mask. She did not utter a word of condemnation; she just told Nash to report for his normal duties and hung up the receiver.

Sir Hastings watched her with fear written all over his face. He was the one man in the world who knew her moods, and her present glacial calmness terrified him.

"How did Conquest know?" she asked in a whisper. "How did he guess? This means that he's already in London, and there's nothing more we can do—until he comes back into the district."

"But what if he doesn't come?"

"He'll come," said the girl, and the laugh she gave was like the flickering of hell flames. "He thinks he's in love with me; he's attracted; he can't keep away. I shall have to kill him with my own hands."

A tap sounded on the door.

"Come!" invited Primrose automatically.

Then, with a smile, she crossed to the door. This was the only soundproof room in the house, and the soft tap had really been caused by a small brass knocker on the other side of the door. She found the butler on the mat.

"Well, Dawes?"

"The young person has just come about the parlour maid's position, miss," said the butler respectfully. "You instructed me to inform you as soon as she arrived. I have shown her into the morning room, miss."

"All right; I'll join her in a minute."

The conversation was typically that of a butler talking to his young mistress. Yet Dawes was no ordinary butler; he, of all the indoor servants, was the only one who knew the strange secrets of the household. The other members of the staff—cook, scullery maids, housemaids—were just ordinary domestics. Primrose Trevor herself was a woman, and she was contemptuously aware of the weaknesses of her own sex; she would have no woman in the house who might, by the use of her tongue, endanger them all. The Hall servants, when they enjoyed their half days and evenings, carried only stories of a kindly squire and a generous, lovable daughter.

"We can't seem to get hold of a good second parlour maid," said Primrose, as she gave her hair a final pat. "Ann, the girl who left on Monday, was clumsy and untidy and thoroughly lazy. I haven't much faith in the Studbury Registry Office; that's why I put the advertisement in the local paper. If this new girl behaves as well as she writes she might be suitable."

Primrose tripped across the hall with graceful ease. A minute ago she had been talking about killing Norman Conquest with her own hands; now she was employed in the extremely innocent task of engaging a new parlour maid! She was the breath of fragrant loveliness as she entered the morning room. A very small, neatly dressed girl rose from the edge of a chair on which she had been sitting and looked at Primrose with steady eyes. The girl had a bright, alert, intelligent little face.

"You are Mary Stevens?" asked Primrose.

"Yes, madam."

"Well, Mary, I like your looks," said the mistress of Bardlow Hall, giving the girl a smile of such friendliness that she was immediately at her ease. "I like your letter too. If your references are satisfactory I think you might be very suitable. Where have you been working?"

"At a boarding house in Clacton, madam," said Mary Stevens. "The two ladies who run the place did not want to lose me, but I felt I'd like a change. I don't very much like seaside boarding houses during the season. I'm not afraid of the work, madam, but you can't keep the house running properly, no matter what you do."

The references she presented were excellent. Her home had been in Norfolk, but both her parents were dead and

she was anxious to find a place which she could regard as home.

"Miss Bloom and Miss Bliss offered to send my trunk on, madam, if you desired me to start at once," said the girl. "The boarding house is on the telephone, and if you would care to ring up my late mistress about me——"

"I don't think that will be necessary, Mary," interrupted Primrose Trevor, with another of her friendly smiles. "I prefer to rely on my own judgment. You're engaged. The wages will be fifty pounds a year and you will be paid monthly. Dawes will show you to your room and you can arrange your afternoons off with him. Dawes is the butler."

"Thank you, madam," said Mary Stevens. "Would you telephone to Miss Bloom for my trunk, or shall I write?"

"I'll phone her at once," promised Primrose.

A few minutes later the new parlour maid was on her way upstairs, escorted by Dawes; and Primrose Trevor dismissed Mary Stevens completely from her mind. Which was the first great mistake she had ever made.

For when Mary Stevens found herself alone in her neat little bedroom, she placed her back to the door, and her elfin face lost all its "trained servant" qualities and broke into a smile of sheer unholy joy, tinged with a kind of granite determination. Her dark eyes were shining with a light which was strangely reminiscent of Norman Conquest's battle gleam. Indeed, if the word "battle" had been written all over this girl, it could not have been more apparent.

"Well, Desperado, I'm in!" murmured Joy Everard, her little chin tilting. "I'm right here in the same house as this Primrose menace, so you'd better watch your step!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NORMAN PUTS OVER A DEAL

IT WAS WHILE Norman Conquest was driving through the West End to the eminently exclusive tailoring establishment of Messrs. McIsaac and McLevi, Limited, that, for no reason at all, a flush of plain, common-or-garden guilt swept over his clear-cut countenance.

He had thought of Joy Everard.

It was the first time he had thought of her all day, and it was rather significant that this should hit him at the very second Joy was standing with her back to her bedroom door, warning him to watch his step. A psychoanalyst, informed of his phenomenon, would have yelled "telepathy" without

any hesitation, and he may have been right. On the other hand, he would probably have been wrong to blazes.

Honest-to-goodness coincidence was a far more likely explanation than the suggestion that Joy could shove her thoughts through about seventy miles of space, including the negotiation of quite a few hills. After all, it was high time that Norman should think of Joy Everard. His thoughts were so full of Primrose that the sterling little girl who had partnered him in many a deadly danger had been tucked into a corner of his mind and the door shut on her.

Norman Conquest squirmed. The driving seat of his Hispano was perfectly comfortable, but he squirmed nevertheless. He felt hot. When he stole a glance at Mandeville Livingstone, to see if the ex-tramp had noticed anything, he was positively furtive.

"Damn!" murmured Norman Conquest.

"Sir?"

"Nothing—only damn!"

Norman's mood quickly changed. He felt aggrieved. There was no earthly reason why he should feel guilty—well, very little. He had just remembered that he had kissed Primrose Trevor, and that Joy had seen him doing it. He had fully intended to ring her up at her aunts' boarding house in Clacton-on-Sea, but he had been so darned busy that he hadn't had a minute. A feeble excuse, for he had had lots of minutes. The trouble was, he didn't know what the devil to say. One can't just explain to a girl why one was kissing another girl. At least one can, but it won't help much. It's far more likely to lead to grim complications.

Better, on the whole, to let it blow over. Young Pixie—as Norman always thought of Joy—was the most sensible girl he had ever known and, as soon as she had got over her huff, she would realize that his interest in Primrose Trevor was purely platonic—indeed, fatherly. He coldly ignored the inner voice which rudely said "nuts."

"Hold hard, guv'nor!" It was the voice of Brother Mandeville, and it broke in on Norman's thoughts as a welcome relief. "You ain't going to take me in this swell place, are you?"

The big Hispano had pulled up right outside the awe-inspiring establishment jointly owned by Mr. McIsaac and Mr. McLevi. Norman Conquest's only reply was to hop out of the car, seize the ex-tramp, and propel him through the big swivelling door.

"Gord love us!" breathed Mandeville, his wizene little face full of awe.

Mr. McIsaac, who came striding forward to meet the new

customers, felt very much like making the same remark, but he was far too well brought up to do so.

"Good morning, Mr. Conquest," he said, averting his gaze from Mandeville Livingstone and repressing a slight shudder. "Quite a few weeks since we have seen you, sir!"

"Well, feast your eyes, Brother Izzy, because you'll only see me for a couple of minutes," said Norman briskly. "Meet my new valet, Mandeville Livingstone."

Mr. McIsaac rocked on his heels. Mr. McLevi, who had now appeared on the scene, made strange noises like a Croat brigand swearing in Swahili. His one fear was that a representative of the *Tailor and Cutter* would barge in before they could hustle Mandeville into some inner fastness.

"Your—valet, Mr. Conquest?" repeated Mr. McIsaac, achieving the effort of a lifetime and speaking with the cultured politeness of a B.B.C. announcer.

"Yes, treat him exactly as you would treat me," said Norman. "Only more so. Shave him, haircut him, rig him out in the full regalia of gentleman's gentleman, and see that he gets two of each. I'll be back to collect him in about an hour."

"Here, gov'nor!" begged the ex-tramp, with a pleading look in his eyes. "You ain't going to leave me——"

"Have no fear, serf," interrupted Norman kindly. "You mustn't judge the Brothers Mac by their looks. At heart they are gentleness itself, and by the time they're through with you, you'll look so different that you'll never believe that at this hour yesterday you were behind bars with a murder charge festooned all over you."

He waved a cheery hand to the stricken proprietors, who had received this latest piece of information in stunned horror, and strode out of the establishment. He was far too good a customer for Mr. McIsaac or Mr. McLevi to deviate from his instructions.

He chuckled as he got back into his car and drove off. He had just glanced at the photograph he had torn from the newspaper in the Red Lion coffee room at breakfast time. His next stop was at a public telephone booth, and he was quickly through to the Dorchester Hotel.

"Put me through to Mr. Underwood B. Adams' suite," he said crisply. There was a pause, a click and another voice sounded. "Mr. Adams?" asked Norman. "Listen, Mr. Adams——"

"Who is speaking?" interrupted the voice.

"My name is Norman Conquest, but I don't expect you to believe it," said Norman. "I have a proposition to put to you, Mr. Adams——"

"I'm sorry, sir, but Mr. Adams cannot see anybody without an appointment," cut in the voice, and the line went dead.

"Oh, no?" murmured Norman Conquest. "That's what you think!"

Quite unabashed, he climbed back into his car and drove to Bayswater—to his unique flat "Underneath The Arches." Everything was tidy and orderly as he and Joy had left it before he had taken her to her aunts in Clacton.

His first task was to unfasten his suitcase and take out a curious little metal box and open it.

"We're home, children!" said Norman affectionately.

He was gazing upon some remarkably fine diamonds and rubies, and the fact that they were so hot that they almost burned his fingers did not prevent him from handling them. If Sweet William should find the proceeds of the Hotel Supreme jewel robbery in Norman Conquest's possession, all the explaining that Norman could invent would not keep him out of prison.

Ordinarily, the daring "1066" was not interested in jewels—except the few simple trifles he had bought for Joy Everard in a perfectly legitimate manner. Indeed, he had every intention of restoring the property he now handled to its rightful owner—but not yet. Whatever boodle he made out of this adventure—and he fully intended to swell his bank balance until it had a bloated look—would come from Sir Hastings Trevor's old stocking, or tea caddy, or wherever it was he kept his old age pension.

A big racket was in operation, and it was not Norman Conquest's sense of justice which urged him to butt in and gum up the works. He told himself quite emphatically—and rather too emphatically—that the spirit of his Cumberland forefathers could not be denied. In cold, cruel fact, he would have dismissed the fence racket as unworthy of his attentions but for a pair of frightened blue eyes.

In a word, Norman was making the Greatest Mistake of His Life, and judgment on the poor sap must be suspended while one remembers that his earlier activities had been solely dictated by his concern for a cheery little tramp who had shared his rabbit supper with him. There is a very little doubt that Mandeville Livingstone would have been booked for the gallows if Norman had not rallied round.

He took the little black box, after closing it, to the spacious garage which adjoined the flat—which was, in fact, simply another of the railway arches. There was a communicating door, and the garage arch was divided into two spacious compartments, one being a beautifully equipped laboratory. Norman was no chemist, but he amused himself at odd

moments by conducting highly dangerous experiments.

Norman now proceeded to do three things. He turned a chromium-plated tap which presumably controlled the garage water supply; he opened the metal door of a cupboard to its widest extent, clicking it securely onto a little catch; and he removed a big glass jar from one of the shelves. Then he waited. Water was pouring into a hidden cistern and soon the sound died away. At once, a section of the glazed wall slid back, revealing the massively strong door of a safe.

Norman grinned, twiddled the knob of the combination lock, and pulled the safe door open. He was rather pleased with his ingenious secret device. Until those three innocent actions were performed, the safe remained hidden; the rising of the ball cock in the cistern completed an electrical circuit, and this circuit could not be completed unless the cupboard door was fixed on its catch, and unless the glass jar was removed from its place.

Having stowed away the gems, he closed the safe and reversed the other proceedings. In a few moments, the glazed section of the wall slid back into its original place. Norman had done something else while at the safe: he had taken out a bloated roll of perfectly good bank notes, and he stuffed these into his pocket with a smile.

After a quick bath and an equally quick change, he emerged into the morning sunshine perfectly groomed from his rakishly tilted hat to his gleaming shoes. He drove straight to the Dorchester Hotel and took his car into the garage. He had stayed at the Dorchester on more than one occasion, and he was well known to one and all. Norman was a liberal tipper, and his personality was practically the same as a charge of dynamite and it was not likely that he would be forgotten.

"Glad to see you again, Mr. Conquest!" chorused every attendant within vocal range.

"Hi-ya, boys!" said Norman, with a cheery wave of his hand. "Fill her up and—well, well, well! What is this we see? What has the Dorchester come to?"

His keen eyes had detected, without any difficulty whatever, the object he had come to inspect—but which he pretended to view with only mild interest.

"Oh, that, sir?" said one of the men. "Belongs to Mr. Adams, the Yankee millionaire. He's a rare rum bloke, sir! We often have millionaires staying here, but I'm blowed if I've ever seen one like Mr. Adams! As for this contraption——"

"I like it," said Norman softly.

"You—like it, sir?"

"Immensely."

Norman strolled round the magnificent shiny black Packard and trailer which dwarfed every other vehicle in sight. The Packard itself was the biggest automobile Norman had ever seen, but the trailer was a sight for sore eyes. It was an immense streamlined caravan, with a line of porthole windows and two doors—one at the side and one at the back—which might have been fitted to any strong room and no questions asked.

"They say that it's made of a special kind of chromium steel, sir," remarked one of the attendants, as Norman strolled round the caravan. "It's so bulletproof that——"

"Machine-gun bullets, after hitting it, look lie pats of butter," nodded Norman. "Yes, I know. Even the glass of the windows would stop anything short of a six-inch shell. A nifty job, brother."

"Yes, sir, but what's it *for*?" asked the attendant, scratching his head. "Why should anybody want to go travelling over England in a blooming tank?"

"The very point I'm going to raise with Mr. Millionaire Adams," murmured Norman dryly.

He went into the hotel, learned the position of Mr. Adams' suite and went straight up, dispensing with the formality of having himself announced. His knock was answered by an exceedingly English-looking manservant, who, visibly impressed by Norman's transcendent immaculateness, parked his habitual expression of supercilious superiority and became slightly human.

"I regret exceedingly, sir, that it is quite impossible for you to see Mr. Adams," he said unhappily, after learning that this perfectly groomed young man had no appointment. "I'm afraid it would be a waste of time to announce your name——"

He paused; his voice trailed away, and he gave a perfect imitation of a rabbit fascinated by a sabre-toothed tiger. He had just caught sight of the five-pound note which Norman was idly crackling in his fingers.

"We're all liable to make mistakes, friend," murmured the Gay Desperado. "You, for example, might easily mistake me for somebody whom Mr. Adams is expecting and push me into the Presence before realizing your error."

"Such a thing, of course, sir, is within the bounds of possibility," said the exceedingly English-looking manservant, deftly hooking the fiver and performing a feat of legerdemain with it. "If you will come this way, sir."

He walked sedately across the entrance lounge of the suite.

tapped the panel of a door on the far side, and threw the door open.

"The gentleman, sir," announced the E.E.L.M., who evidently believed in playing for safety.

Norman was in the room, and the door was closed before Mr. Underwood B. Adams had time to look up.

"Say, listen, stooge!" said Mr. Adams, picking up a pair of horn-rimmed glasses and placing them on his nose, thereby improving the look of his face. "When I tell a guy to be here at a certain time, I don't mean ten minutes earlier! The appointment was for . . . Say, who the hell are you?"

Mr. Adams spoke the last words in a sharply rising voice, and he accompanied them by a sharply rising heave of his fat and flabby body. It was evident that he had been expecting somebody quite different from Norman Conquest, and the sight of that smiling young man seemed to occasion him an alarm far beyond the proportions of the circumstances. For there was nothing whatever in Norman's appearance to alarm a gazelle.

"I thought I'd drop in," exclaimed Norman casually.

"You thought——! Hey, where's that fool of a butler?" ejaculated Mr. Adams, reaching for the bell. "He's fired!"

"Calm yourself, Brother Adams," drawled Norman, strolling to an easy-chair and lazily dropping into it. "I'm here to do you a good turn. It pains me to see a man of your importance making a goofy sap of himself."

If any words were calculated to stay Mr. Adams' pudgy finger on its way to the bell push, these words were the goods. The millionaire stared at his visitor blankly.

"Wassat?" he jerked.

Norman Conquest chuckled inwardly. His knowledge of Mr. Adams, prior to this interview, had been sketchy, but the man exactly fitted Norman's mental picture. Mr. Adams was immensely rich; he was inordinately fond of display, and he was one of America's retired beer barons. He was one of the few who had filled the old stocking to bursting point during the palmy days of prohibition, and who had had the horse sense to quit before becoming entangled in an income tax quiz. He had been the czar of what he considered to be a perfectly legitimate business, and he had not allowed himself to be tempted by the protection and snatch rackets which many of his colleagues had turned to after the sale of liquor had become legal. Hence Mr. Adams was still alive and in a position to enjoy his wealth.

But Mr. Adams, like many another great man, suffered from a weakness. Although it was some years since he had been engaged in active business, he still possessed a racketeer

complex. Even in peace-loving England he lived in constant fear of strong-arm guys muscling in and shooting him up. The London newspapers said that Mr. Adams was aiming to give England the once over before proceeding to the Continent, and it was his evident intention to tour the country in his bullet-and-bomb-proof caravan. Which was merely another example of his fear bug.

"Listen, feller!" said Mr. Adams, glaring at Norman Conquest. "I don't know who you are, but no English dude is gonna call me a goofy sap and get away with it!"

Norman Conquest shrugged and leisurely slipped a smoke into his smiling mouth.

"If you go riding around the English countryside in that fancy wheeled fortress of yours, you'll not only have English dudes calling you a goofy sap, but English hicks as well," he observed smoothly. "You'll start a laugh that will shake this little island like an earthquake."

"Geez! No kidding?" said Mr. Adams, as he subsided limply back into his chair.

"No kidding!" replied Norman firmly.

He had struck the right note with a firm wallop. A man of the ex-beer baron's temperament was more susceptible to ridicule than anything else. The idea of people laughing at him sent cold shivers down his spine.

"You don't know what you're letting yourself in for," continued Norman, seizing his advantage. "You've only got to go out on the English highways with that freak contraption and you'll raise more yells than a travelling circus. You'll have the kids running after it and making faces, and when you camp at night people will flock round, looking for the pay box, and asking when the performance is going to start."

Mr. Adams' heavy, flabby face looked as though it had been hit by a tornado.

"Ya don't say!" he muttered hoarsely.

"But that's just what I do say!" insisted Norman, rising to his full height and gazing with kindly pity on the millionaire. "Listen, Mr. Adams, my name's Conquest, and I'm here to take your Packard and caravan off your hands. I've got a great respect for America, and I hate to see a man of your prominence spattering the Stars and Stripes with raspberries. Name your price and I'll buy the covered wagon for spot cash."

Mr. Adams did not reply for some moments, as he was having a little trouble with his thyroid cartilage. Adam's apple to you. He only succeeded in giving voice after he had pushed his eyeballs back into their sockets.

"You'll do—what?" he gurgled.

"Money," said Norman crisply, "talks." He placed a fat roll of £50 Bank of England notes on the desk in front of Mr. Adams' strained eyes. "This little lot is yelling to you to the melody of ten thousand pounds. Or in real money—fifty grand."

"You're crazy! I paid sixty grand——"

"So what? What is it now? Junk!" Norman Conquest waved a contemptuous hand. "Anybody else wouldn't offer you a nickel. Get wise to yourself, Big Shot. Haven't you seen the newspapers? They're razzing you already—and they haven't even seen the pantechicon."

"Yeah, but I kinda like that travelling bunk house," protested the ex-racketeer.

"Listen, Mr. Adams! I'm doing you a good turn," continued Norman briskly. "I'm willing to pay a fancy price for your automobile and caravan because I'm a bit nutty. Maybe you'll say you don't know who I am? That's easy." He seized the telephone. "Maybe you think this money is phoney? Well, I'll soon . . . Hallo! Desk? Send the manager right up to Mr. Adams' suite, and tell him to hustle." He put the receiver back and went straight on talking. "A man of your importance, Mr. Adams, can't make a laughing stock of himself in England without the American yellow sheets splashing wild stories all over their front pages."

"Hell! Ya don't think——"

"Brother, there's no thinking about it," Norman interrupted, scarcely giving the unfortunate man a chance to get a word in edgeways. "I'm giving you the real dope." He leaned over the desk and looked Mr. Adams squarely in the eye. "Have you figured what Walter Winchell would say?"

Mr. Underwood B. Adams wilted. He may, or may not, have cared a hoot what Walter Winchell was likely to say; but Norman Conquest's dynamic personality was enveloping him in a kind of brain-paralyzing aura. And Norman gave him no chance of coming out of it—for if he did come out of it and started thinking, the whole transaction might blow up.

A tap sounded on the door and Norman took lithe strides and opened it. The man who stood there was the assistant manager, and he appeared somewhat surprised to see Norman.

"Come right in, Aubrey," said Norman cordially. "Mr. Adams is selling me his Packard and trailer, and he wants to be satisfied that my money is good. Take a look."

The assistant manager, who knew Norman Conquest as one of the hotel's wealthiest patrons, picked up the money gingerly, as though it might burn him and examined it.

"Why, of course, Mr. Conquest, the money is good."

"Don't tell me," said Norman. "Tell him."

The assistant manager told Mr. Adams plenty. One might have gathered from his remarks that Norman, on account of his first name, was related to the Governor of the Bank of England himself. He agreed with Norman, and agreed heartily, that Mr. Adams would make a laughing stock of himself if he went round the country in his bulletproof home on wheels. The ex-beer baron, already disconcerted and flustered, began to sweat.

While he was sweating, and while his brain was still missing on five cylinders, he appended his signature to a stamped receipt which Norman deftly placed in front of him. Almost without knowing it, he produced the registration book and insurance papers of his car and surrendered them. It is doubtful if any other man could have put the deal over with such slick smoothness as that displayed by Norman Conquest. The Packard and trailer had been his practically from the moment he entered the room. And there was no swindle about it. He was paying a high price and his money was kosher.

It was not until Mr. Underwood B. Adams was alone again that he regained consciousness and realized that his beloved gangster-proof caravan was no longer his property. He proceeded to put up a beef which rocked the Dorchester to its foundations—but it was too late. He had signed on the dotted line; he had accepted good money, and his auto and trailer had gone anyway.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE £10,000 MAYFAIR ROBBERY

IT WAS NOT the gladdest day of all the glad new year for Messrs. McIsaac and McLevi, either. Having got over the shock of Mandeville Livingstone's trampish and unshaven condition, and having converted the little man into a spruce and efficient-looking valet, they received another shock when a vast monstrosity on wheels, all shiny black, came to a stop right outside their main entrance, thereby excluding most of the daylight from the premises. To make things worse, a big crowd began to collect.

"All set?" asked Norman Conquest, as he breezed in.

"You again, sir?" said Mr. McIsaac with a groan.

"I seem to detect a note of distress in your voice, Izzy," said Norman kindly. "Is something wrong?"

"That—er—capacious vehicle outside the door, sir——"

"Oh, that? Well, perhaps you're right. I don't think the

constabulary are exactly crazy about it, and I shall get pinched for obstruction if I'm not slippy. Produce Brother Mandy and I'll be on my way."

Mr. McIsaac not only produced Brother Mandy, but Mr. McLevi also produced a bill. It was a large bill, and Livingstone who was surrounded by a bevy of assistants, all carrying parcels, rocked on his heels when he saw the number of crisp bank notes which changed hands. A minute later Norman Conquest was outside again, with his new handyman sitting beside him in the front seat of the Packard. The numerous parcels were shot into the rear; the doors were slammed, and the whole outfit was on its way before a policeman had had time to get through the crowd.

"All that money, sir!" faltered Mandeville Livingstone, recovering the use of his voice about five miles later. "Gord love us! And this swell clobber! I ain't worth it, guv'nor!"

"A matter of opinion, Mandeville. If I'm going to have a manservant, he's got to be dressed respectably." Norman glanced round at the caravan, which was trailing with delightful smoothness. "When we get to a less congested area, we'll stop at a grocery store and get stocked up with food. Later on I'll introduce you to our new home."

"Blimey! You ain't half a caution, guv'nor!" said the one-time tramp huskily. "This swell outfit must have cost you thousands."

"Ten of 'em to be exact," replied Norman gaily. "But who cares? She's worth every penny of the money, slave. And somebody else will pay for her in the end, so what the hell? She's the only one like it in the world, Mandeville, and I simply had to have her."

A considerable stir was caused in the Romford area when Norman pulled up outside a modest grocery shop and bought about half the proprietor's stock. Then on again through rural Essex and into Suffolk. Finally the enormous caravan was deftly steered into a clearing of the woods not two miles from Bardlow Hall. That is, two miles by road. Across fields, the distance was less than half, and the trees which surrounded the stately old mansion were in full view from the camping ground.

"Now, Brother Mandy, you can take a look," said Norman, as he got out of the car. "To your innocent eyes, just an ordinary, if lavish, Packard sedan, but if you observe closely you will see a number of interesting points. The wheels, for example. See those studded plates over them? Every vulnerable part of the car is protected by chrome-nickel armour plate. Aim a tommy gun at this baby and the bullets will bounce off like peas."

"Gord!" said Mandeville Livingstone.

"The petrol tank is shielded by tough sheets of chrome-nickel alloy steel, and even the hub caps are protected so that the bearings can't get damaged," continued Norman enthusiastically. "The same kind of armour plates are fitted behind the swanky-looking radiator, and every bit of glass is just as bulletproof as the body. In fact, my dear Popeye—and that name suits you splendidly right this minute—if a bomb fell right on the top of this car, it would merely shake it and cause a dent or two!"

He produced a key, unlocked one of the doors of the caravan, and they passed inside. It was easy to understand that the whole outfit had cost over ten thousand pounds. The interior of the caravan was divided into a living room, two separate sleeping compartments and a kitchen. There was even a shower. Throughout, the decorations were ornate—a trifle too ornate for Norman Conquest's tastes—and there was every conceivable luxury fitting. A more comfortable home for two people—or even three—would have been difficult to find. And the caravan was just as bulletproof and bombproof and gasproof as the car.

"You can try your skill on the electric stove and rustle up a meal," said Norman, as he drew in a lungful of sweet country air. "Did you ever see a more peaceful spot, brother? Birds twittering, bees fooling about among the wild flowers, worms wriggling out of their holes——"

"You ain't fooling me, guv'nor," interrupted Livingstone, looking at his young employer out of bright, eager eyes. "We're right back where we started from this morning, within a mile of Great Bardlow, and it seems to me there ain't a more dangerous place in the whole of England! And you don't come back quiet-like, but in this blooming contraption, and in broad daylight too."

"Nice work, Brother Mandy," approved Norman, grinning. "You catch on quickly. The whole idea is to give the opposition a touch of the jitters. I was never one for hole-and-corner work. When I fight, I fight in the open. But as I should hate to become a victim of night starvation, I thought it advisable to invest in a brand of sleeping chamber that's practically dirty-work proof. In this caravan, laddie, we can enjoy our nine hours in safety and comfort."

The little man soon conjured up an excellent meal, for he was something of a magician with a frying pan. While Norman ate, he talked; Livingstone was to unpack the groceries and store them away; he was to obtain a supply of fresh milk and farm eggs, but he was to be back before dark.

"Nothing is likely to happen to you while the sun shines," said Norman. "But after dark, so they say, the powers of evil are abroad—and you can take it from me, Mandeville, that the powers of evil in this particular quarter of the world are double-distilled. I can't say when I shall be back——"

"Back, sir? Are you going somewhere?"

"And how!" said Norman Conquest softly.

Ten minutes later he was off. He unhitched the caravan from the magnificent shiny Packard, and went roaring back to London in a happy mood. The precautions he was taking might be unnecessary, but it was just as well to be on the safe side.

He had plenty of time. Rotherhithe, down by the Thames, was his real objective. He had not forgotten his meeting with the mate of the *Nancy Lee*. Before proceeding to the dingy riverside, however, he made a trip west, to his unique railway arch flat.

There was something he wanted. Or, at least, he might want it. The Boy Scout Movement had nothing on Norman Conquest.

On the outskirts of that vaguely defined district known as Mayfair there was a slight diversion. A powerful saloon car came hurtling out of a side street and took the corner on two wheels with a blissful disregard of the red lights and the public weal. Norman, who was sailing serenely along with the full right of way, performed a miracle of acrobatics with the wheel of his car and avoided a crash by a gnat's eyebrow.

"Brother," said Norman severely, "you can't do that there 'ere!"

He entered into the fun with enthusiasm. Nobody was going to make near-mincemeat of him and get away with it. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that a police car was in full pursuit of the saloon and, without a second's hesitation, Norman swung the big Packard round a street island and sandwiched himself in between pursuers and pursued. A moment later he was a part and parcel of the chase.

The man at the wheel of the saloon was certainly an expert in the art of shaving inches off each bend and taking corners in broadside skids that saved yards. There were two men in the car for Norman could see a face pressed against the rear window, and as it became clear that the big Packard was not going to be shaken off, the glass of the rear window was suddenly shattered and something black and round poked itself out.

"So we're going to have games, are we?" laughed Norman with sheer glee. "That suits me fine!"

It was evident to him that the runaway saloon was following a carefully planned route through the less frequented back streets of the West End. There was never any hesitation, never a moment of doubt. At a crazy, dangerous speed, the saloon hurtled on. And foot by foot, the Packard gained. The police car had long since dropped behind.

Pedestrians halted in their tracks and stared in dumbfounded amazement as the two automobiles went hurtling along. If they were film-goers, they were probably reminded of scenes of hectic gangster warfare in the streets of Chicago. The similiarity was even more striking a few seconds later. For as the Packard surged nearer and nearer, a sudden wicked rattle of tommy-gun fire burst out. At such close range the target was as easy to hit as a haystack, and the bullets spattered over the front of Norman Conquest's car like hail.

"There's nothing," said Norman, "like giving the old bus a thorough test. This binge might have been engineered for my especial benefit."

Although his words were lightly spoken, his quartz-gray eyes were as cold as ice chips, and his jaw squared itself grimly. Every second this crazy chase lasted, he well knew, the lives of innocent pedestrians were menaced. His foot descended firmly on the throttle, and the Packard went forward like a thunderbolt. Norman reached round and pulled out an automatic.

Zurrrrrrrrh—zurrrrrrrrh!

Another burst of machine-gun fire belched from the rear of the fleeing saloon. Some of the bullets struck Norman's windscreen with cracks like pistol shots—but nothing happened. The Packard continued to overtake. Norman Conquest thrust a lithe and steady arm through his open driving window.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Again and again he pulled the trigger. He was aiming at the fugitive's rear tires, and his feet hovered over the control of pedals, ready for instant action. The precaution was necessary for the speeding saloon suddenly gave a wild, awe-inspiring swerve. The near-side rear tire was flat and tearing itself to ribbons! The car, completely out of control, charged headlong into a street island, spun round like a top and overturned. Norman trod on everything, but it was impossible to pull up in time and he shot past the wreckage with a mere inch to spare, coming to a stop a few yards farther on.

"Nice work, Desperado," said Norman approvingly.

As there was nobody else present to compliment him on his

achievement, he did not hesitate to put in a good word for himself. While he was getting out of his car, however, and while a number of bystanders were rushing excitedly to the scene, the raucous sound of a police car came nearer and nearer. Norman opened his driving door just in time to see the prowler jerk to a violent stop and vomit two or three men in plain clothes.

"Bandits?" drawled Norman, as he strolled across.

There was a wicked little note in his voice and a hell-for-leather twinkle in his eyes; for he had recognized the foremost figure as that of his old friend, Sweet William. The apple-cheeked inspector halted dead in his tracks and made sounds like a spouting whale.

"You!" he managed to gurgle at last.

"Well, well, well! How our paths do cross, Bill!" said Norman coolly. "It's rather lucky for you I happened to be knocking about, or you'd have lost your game. If you've got a sack and a shovel or two, you can arrest them!"

"How the hell—all right, forget it!" Inspector Williams spoke thickly. "I'll ask you some questions later. Meanwhile, thanks for your help."

His subordinates had been examining the wrecked car and its contents. A man now came across and reported.

"Two men in the car, sir—Ricky Peters and Walworth Joe. They're both pretty badly cracked up. Nothing else in the car——"

"Nothing else?" almost yelped Mr. Williams. "You're crazy! There must be something else!"

Norman Conquest waited interestedly while the inspector himself hurried to the overturned car and made an examination. Big crowds had collected by this time, and a large number of police officers were forming a cordon round the scene.

Presently, Mr. Williams emerged from the group round about the wreck, and he pushed his way almost roughly past a couple of white-coated hospital attendants who were carrying a stretcher to the scene. On Mr. Williams' face there was an expression of intense disgust, and he was clamping his jaw with such ferocity that his upper denture was liable to crack at any moment.

"You don't look happy, Bill," murmured Norman.

"Happy!" Inspector Williams uttered a hollow sound, something between a bitter laugh and groan. "A couple of cheap pickpockets! Not a sign of the loot! A decoy car, used for the one purpose of fooling us!"

"I judge there has been a robbery?"

"Oh, no! Nothing much!" said Mr. Williams, in a voice

which suggested that he had swallowed a quart of gall. "You don't call ten thousand quids' worth of jewellery a robbery, do you? Lady Dalecourt is having forty fits of hysterics, but these society women always make a fuss over nothing!"

Norman Conquest felt a little quiver of electricity pass up and down his spinal column.

"Another job pulled off by the phantom gang, eh?" he murmured. "They don't let much grass grow under their feet, do they, Bill? It's just one big job after another, and you're never able to get a smell of the big fellow behind the racket."

"By God, Conquest, you never spoke a truer word," growled the worried inspector. "These rats are as clever as hell. They spring a new trick with every job. Lady Dalecourt is robbed in her own flat, while she is dining, and the alarm is given at once. I happen to be cruising round in a squad car and see a saloon shooting off and defying the lights. And who's in it? A couple of minor thugs from South London! The only thing we can charge 'em with—after they come out of hospital—is violation of the traffic regulations!"

"And while you're blinding after the decoy car, the real thief unobtrusively slips away and vanishes into London's millions," said Norman Conquest sympathetically. "It's a tough break, Bill. Maybe we'll meet again one day."

His abrupt termination of the conversation made Inspector Williams stare with hard eyes. The Gay Desperado was taking lithe strides towards his Packard, and the inspector was at the driving window as Norman settled himself in the seat.

"Just a minute——"

"Nice of you, Bill," said Norman. "I take it that you're going to clear the way for me?"

"I want to know how you happened to be on the spot," retorted Mr. Williams grimly. "Listen, Conquest! I'm not making any accusations, but it's damned queer, to say the least of it, that you should be so handy!"

"They say that coincidence plays funny tricks——"

"Blast coincidence!" exploded the usually placid inspector. "Anstey tells me that these pickpockets used a machine gun——"

"Then you were wrong about that traffic regulation charge," interrupted Norman. "You can festoon a really hot rap on the blokes. Blinding away with a machine gun is no trifling offence——"

"Sergeant Anstey also tells me that this machine gun was blinding away at you!" said Williams heavily. "Funnily enough, this car of yours isn't damaged, although the bullets

hit you at point-blank range. What kind of a car is it, anyway?"

"Bill, you'd be surprised," laughed Norman. "You'll also be disappointed when I inform you that I bought it for good solid money from an American millionaire this morning."

And, without giving the inspector any further chance to question him, he sent the Packard gliding forward with raucously-sounding horn. The police cordon made an opening for him without hesitation; and in less than a minute he was speeding away from the scene. That electric feeling was still surging up and down his vertebræ, and in his eyes there was an unholy light of joyous understanding.

"Next stop, Rotherhithe!" he chortled gleefully. "If Lady Dalecourt's jewels aren't bound for the good ship *Nancy Lee*, then I'm Sanders of the River!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE SIGN OF 1066

NORMAN CONQUEST seemed to have a strange idea of getting to Rotherhithe, for he made straight for Bayswater. But he considered that the brief detour was well worth while.

His visit to "Underneath the Arches" was so hurried that the Packard was away again in less than three minutes. In that short time Norman had donned a shabby mackintosh and a slouch hat, to say nothing of old and dirty shoes. Even his face had lost its fresh bloom of health and had become sallow and grubby. And in one of his pockets he carried the thing he had originally intended fetching.

As he drove swiftly through the West End streets, he pondered over the interesting machinations of fate. He had come to London for the express purpose of prowling around Swinton's Wharf, by the Rotherhithe riverside—just a routine job to scout out the lie of the land, in case he should find it necessary to go into action later. One of Norman Conquest's secrets of success was his utter thoroughness.

Now, unexpectedly, he had a vivid and concrete reason for exploring Swinton's Wharf. He knew, with a hunch as big as a mountain, that one of Sir Hastings Trevor's wheat-carrying barges was moored alongside Swinton's Wharf. Whether or not she was the *Nancy Lee* did not matter. Sir Hastings owned a fleet of barges.

The Packard rolled over London Bridge, turned down Tooley Street—which at this hour of the evening was more or less deserted—and continued onwards by way of Jamaica

Road to Rotherhithe and the river.

It was not an ideal district for parking a large and expensive automobile. Norman got out of the car in the busiest part of the main street, where the lights were brightest. He locked the ignition and the doors and coolly strolled away. He might be summoned for obstruction, but there wasn't the slightest fear of anybody playing monkey tricks with the big Packard.

Diving into back alleys and side streets, he eventually slouched down a roughly paved and ill-lighted lane which led directly onto Swinton's Wharf. There was no locked gate to bar the way, and the dark river, mysterious in a swirling half mist, stretched before him. He could only dimly see the struggling lights on the other side of the river and, except for the occasional mournful hoot of a tug's siren, all was quiet.

Norman sidled along like a shadow, keeping his back to a warehouse wall. It seemed, at first, that Swinton's Wharf was completely deserted; but when he was able to obtain a look at a different angle, he saw that a low, squat, motor barge was tied up to the dock-side. Her deck was empty, and only her riding lights twinkled eerily through the mist.

Creeping to a cover of a pile of packing cases and barrels, Norman crouched low and prepared himself for a vigil of uncertain duration. He had lost no time in getting to Rotherhithe, except for the brief visit to his flat, and it was unlikely that the contact who carried the Dalecourt jewels would make the journey by car. The organization behind these big robberies was clever; every move was worked out so that the whole machine operated with clocklike precision. The man who actually lifted the jewels had probably passed them on to another within three minutes of the accomplishment of the job; this second man had, just as likely, slipped the stuff to somebody else.

But Norman was convinced that sooner or later the boodle would find its way to Swinton's Wharf. He might have to wait half an hour; he might have to wait half the night. He was prepared for anything.

Less than ten minutes had elapsed when a sound came from the barge and a streak of light shot upwards through the mist from the opened companion hatch. Two men appeared, one tall and thin, and the other broad and big-limbed.

"Hope this mist ain't goin' to get any worse, Ned," said the first man. "Tide's just right and we've got to be pushing off pretty soon."

"Well, I shan't be long, cap," replied the other man, as he stepped onto the wharf. "Not more than ten minutes,

at the most. I've only got to meet——"

"I know who you've got to meet," interjected the thin man sharply. "You talk a sight too much, Ned. Don't go wastin' time on any of them gals, neither."

Norman Conquest smiled contentedly. He had easily recognized the voice of his old acquaintance, Mr. Edward Nash, the mate of the *Nancy Lee*. He was rather surprised. After what had happened in the earlier part of the day, he had rather thought that Mr. Nash would be relieved of his duties. Perhaps the Dalecourt job had been too carefully arranged to allow of any last-minute change.

"So our pal with the tattooed arms is on his way to meet somebody," mused Norman. "And he won't be more than ten minutes. I think the situation calls for a little action."

Silently he shed his shabby mackintosh and hat and shoes. More like a snake than a human being, he slid across the short intervening space to the edge of the dock; and a moment later he lowered himself without a ripple or a splash into the chill and unsavoury waters of the Thames. Personal discomfort meant nothing to the Desperado when he was out on business.

To a man who has dived for pearl oysters in the South Seas, and who was as much at home in the water as a fish, the brief underwater swim to the side of the moored barge was child's play. Searchlights could have been playing on the surface of the water and nothing would have been seen.

Norman judged his distance to a foot. When he eased up and stretched out an exploring hand, his fingers came in contact with cold steel plates. As he felt his way round, his memory was busy. He recalled how he had swum alongside a sister barge to this vessel—or, for all he knew, it might have been the self-same craft—in the quiet river within a mile of Bardlow Hall. He had made the sensational discovery, then, that the proceeds of big robberies were carried from London by barge. But they were not carried in such a way that a search would reveal their presence. The precious parcel, enclosed in a watertight, hermetically sealed box, was concealed in a cunningly devised cavity of the vessel's steel hull. Even when the barge reached her destination, the stolen property was not openly handled. It was drawn from the barge's side, under water, along a steel cable. Which explains why Norman Conquest had the loot of the Hotel Supreme robbery in his possession.

He knew the exact spot in the vessel's side for, with his usual care for such details, he had marked the place very definitely in his memory.

Having risen cautiously to the surface, he listened for a

few moments, took his bearings, and silently inhaled a fresh supply of air. Then he went under again, sliding along for some feet, one hand in contact with the vessel. Reaching the spot where he knew the hidden cavity to exist, he felt carefully with his sensitive fingers. But he could find no trace of a secret sliding door, or a break in the smooth plates.

But this was merely a proof that the door was well constructed. It never occurred to Norman that he might have made a mistake in his calculations. He knew, quite positively, that he had not.

Again he rose to the surface and waited. He had used up about eight minutes, so he knew that his wait would be brief. Almost at once, in fact, he heard hurried footsteps on the wharf, and then the sound of somebody walking on the barge's deck. The muffled voice of the captain came from somewhere below.

"Okay, cap," said Nash, in a low tone.

Norman grinned. He heard the man clatter down the companion steps. And Norman Conquest took another fill of air and slid silently beneath the surface. If Edward Nash was carrying what Norman believed he was carrying, it was the hottest parcel in London, and the sooner it could be placed in cold storage, the better. There was not likely to be any delay in this respect.

There wasn't.

Norman, some feet under water, his ear pressed against the cold steel plates, heard a click almost immediately. It came from a spot a few inches lower down and about a foot towards the stern. Proof enough that Norman's calculations had been accurate. He shifted his position and listened more intently. The sounds were now quite loud. He heard a little clang of metal, a shuffle, and then a hard snapping click. After that—complete silence. Norman took a little screw driver out of his pocket and scratched a rough circle, about eight inches in diameter, over the spot from which the sounds had come. Then it was time to go up again for more air.

Excessive caution was now needed, so he poked little more than his eyebrows above the surface to begin with. He could hear clumping feet on the barge's deck; the sound of gruff voices. Soon, he knew, the vessel's motor would start up and she would push out into the river. From his pocket the Desperado pulled a compact gadget which looked not unlike an oversized automatic pistol. This was the thing he had hurried to his flat to obtain.

Once again he dived, and the pressure of a button on the machine he held sent out a tiny spear of light. It was not

capable of travelling far in that murky water, but it was sufficient to reveal the rough circle which Norman had scratched. He knew that this particular part of the steel plate was actually a part of the secret sliding door. Obviously, there were two such doors—an inner and an outer. When one was hermetically closed, the other could be opened, and *vice versa*. At the moment they were both secured.

At the pressure of another trigger-like button, a curious thing happened. There was a sudden splutter and a tiny flame of incredible intensity shot out of the nozzle. In a word, the thing was a miniature high-pressure blow lamp, and one that could actually be ignited under water. Its power was almost unbelievable, as can be judged from the fact that Norman accomplished his complete purpose without having to rise to the surface again for air. It was true that he could hold his breath under water for a perfectly fantastic time, but nevertheless he had to put in some snappy action.

The intense flame bit into the steel with scarcely a sound, cutting as cleanly as a saw. Norman knew perfectly well that if anybody happened to look overside, directly over this spot, something would be seen of his activities. But he had to take that chance. Using the faintly scratched circle as a guiding mark, he directed the flame round. At last the circle was completed and the disc of steel, already bent outwards and contorted by the heat, went slithering into the depths of the river. Sometime before this, however, Norman Conquest had grinned happily, knowing that he had made no mistake. For, if he had made a mistake, the river water would have gone rushing clean through into the barge's hold. The cavity beyond this place was just a shallow cubby hole, of sufficient size to snugly accommodate the loot case.

Out went the cutting flame and on came the tiny spotlight. He reached in with his other hand and easily removed a black metal box. He chuckled gaily. Another nasty smack in the eye for the opposition! And there was no reason why they should not learn of it at once. Norman Conquest was a great believer in jolting his enemies as hard and as often as possible.

He rose to the surface, heard sounds of considerable activity from the barge's deck, took another breath, and dived for the last time. All he did, now, was to start the high-pressure lamp again and quickly burn the sign "1066" on the inner side of the interior door. Just a swift flick of the flame was enough to eat the figures into the steel. Then, with the butt end of the machine, after he had ex-

tinguished the flame, he rapped hard on the hollow-sounding plate. If anybody should happen to be in the cabin at the moment, those raps would have an interesting and—to Norman—a humorous result.

He slid away from the spot, still under water, and a moment later he gurgled happily with inward glee; for he had felt the quick rush of water and had, indeed, been drawn to the fierce suction. He heard a dull and ominous roar as he swam swiftly away.

The thing which had happened was not without its humorous side. Nash, the mate, was in the barge's cabin at the moment, as it happened. He heard the raps very distinctly, and he knew just where they were coming from. Startled, even scared, he ran to the companion and yelled for the captain.

"Can't come down now——" began the latter.

"You've got to—quick!" panted Nash. "There's something wrong! For God's sake, hurry!"

His tone brought the captain tumbling down into the cabin and, after only a few brief words had been exchanged, the captain produced a small key and went over to a locker. He turned the key and the door of the locker opened. Then he did something else. Still keeping the key in the lock, he turned it again—and started the great flood.

That second turn of the key was ingenious; it unlocked the secret door in the steel-lined cabin wall. The little door flew open and a solid spout of Thames water came roaring into the cabin. The two men stared in dumbfounded amazement for moment, and then sprang as though actuated by the same force.

"The outer slide's open!" yelled Nash frantically.

It required every ounce of strength the two men possessed to force the door back into place; and while they were doing this they had not failed to see the burned sign "1066" on the inner side of the door. But it meant nothing to them—yet. They were not so well acquainted with Norman Conquest!

When, at last, they got the door closed and they heard the powerful mechanism click, the cabin was flooded to a depth of ten or twelve inches. Desperately they searched about in the water for they knew that the steel box could no longer be in the secret cavity. But it wasn't in the cabin either!

"Gone!" whispered Nash hoarsely. "What'll we do, Cap? The stuff's gone! It wasn't our fault! We locked it up in there! They can't blame us——"

"Keep your head, you damned fool!" snapped the captain. "No need to get panicky. The outer slide couldn't

have opened of its own accord—and, while we were closing the door I saw a rough edge of metal. The box was stolen *from the outside*, Ned! And whoever did it, put that mark "1066" on the inner door!"

They stood looking at one another, their faces pale and haggard—two badly frightened men.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DINNER AT BARDLOW HALL

DINNER at Bardlow Hall that evening was a cheerful, happy and carefree meal. Sir Hastings Trevor and his charming daughter were entertaining a few neighbours; one of the informal dinners for which the Hall was justly famous. The guests were four in number—the vicar and his wife and daughter, and Colonel Franklyn, of the Hill Farm. Local people, and honest souls, who regarded Sir Hastings as a fine example of an English county gentleman. Primrose, of course, was popular with everybody.

It was a homely picture, full of the placid peace of the countryside, as the young hostess presided over the dinner table in the long, low-raftered dining room, with the mellow evening sunshine streaming through the big windows. Dawes and the new parlour maid were on duty; Dawes was hovering about in his most butler-like manner, dishing out the eats, and Joy Everard, now answering to the name of Mary, was keeping everybody well supplied with a quiet efficiency which would have made any Nippy green with envy. Primrose was very pleased with this small, tidy girl, who had dropped into the ways of the house with such workman-like assurance, and who wore her trim uniform so attractively.

The vicar, as usual, was garrulous, talking of politics, the recent murder of Sergeant Roper, and the tithes problem. Sir Hastings was boisterous and hearty, and by tacit consent nobody made any reference to the unhappy fate of Sangley, his late private secretary. The village had not yet got over the sensation. Sangley had murdered Roper and had then committed suicide. The vicar thought it was exceedingly sporting of Sir Hastings to invite people to dinner so soon after the tragedy. The quicker a thing like that was forgotten, the better. It had been an unpleasant jolt for everybody.

The meal was started with Colonel Franklyn an absentee. For some reason he had not turned up and Primrose had seen no reason to keep her other guests waiting, as the

colonel was a free and easy visitor and in the habit of dropping in at any odd time. It was this carefree "open house" hospitality which had made Bardlow Hall one of the most popular houses in the county. Seldom an evening passed without somebody being invited to dinner, and at week-ends there was always a noisy, happy party.

Impossible to suspect that the master of such a house was engaged in one of the biggest criminal rackets of a decade! Still more grotesque to imagine that the lovely daughter was the brains of the crooked organization!

It was this very openness, this utter lack of anything secretive, which defied all possible suspicion. And Joy Everard, observing everything and revealing nothing of her thoughts, was puzzled. She had made many observations during the brief time since she had taken up her duties, and in many ways she regarded the household as a paradox.

On the one hand there was the delightful atmosphere of friendly old-world hospitality, with the great front door ever standing wide open, and Sir Hastings and his daughter busying themselves over the affairs of estate and household; and on the other hand there was the curious phenomenon of the soundproof library, and the certainty that Dawes was an old lag. Joy made no pretence of being a detective, but since her association with Norman Conquest she had learned quite a few things about crooks in general. Norman had taught her how to pick them out; and her own high standard of intelligence did the rest.

She was certain, after she had been in the house for an hour or two, that Dawes was not all that he seemed to be; there was something about his eyes which Joy didn't like; something about the shape of his head and the curious set of his ears too. She was certain that all the other servants were *bona fide* domestics, and pretty dumb at that.

It was the soundproof library which intrigued Joy more than anything else. Any ordinary parlour maid might have lived in the house for a year without realizing that there was anything unusual about that particular room; but Joy possessed unusual advantages and she had twigged the peculiarity within a couple of hours. The walls and doors of Norman Conquest's new flat, Beneath the Arches, were soundproof, and Joy had experienced the curious effects which such soundproofing can produce.

Going about her new duties, she had subconsciously observed that the library door, like most other doors in the house, was generally left invitingly open. Towards teatime, on her way downstairs, she had heard Sir Hastings and Primrose enter the house, talking and laughing. The library

door had just closed when Joy turned a bend of the staircase—and the voices ceased as though a needle had been removed from a gramophone record. When Joy walked past the library door, not even the faintest whisper of sound came out to her.

Later, while pretending to take an interest in a flower bed, she had inspected the library windows from the outside; and had made the interesting discovery that the design of the window frames was such that it was impossible for anybody passing along the terrace to see anything inside the room. Furthermore, there was a wide ornamental rockery just at that portion of the terrace, extending well beyond both the library windows. There was a very pretty lily pool in the middle of the rockery, and a miniature waterfall which kept up a continuous splashing and gurgling.

Small points—but interesting.

Anybody entering the library, and closing the door, was certain that nothing could be seen or heard from either the hall or the terrace. And yet everything looked so delightfully innocent!

Joy had encountered Sir Hastings only twice during the day and he had scarcely spoken to her. She rather liked his looks and his hearty manner; but on the one occasion when he had spoken to her he had looked into her eyes and given her shoulder a friendly pat. Some instinct, impossible to define, warned her against those eyes. Just as Norman Conquest had "spotted" Sir Hastings Trevor, so did Joy Everard. Perhaps it was because her very soul was in affinity with Norman's.

She had no doubt as to her feelings regarding Primrose. The one thing she wanted to do with Primrose was to break her in two, throw her on the ground, and rub her out with her foot. But this instinct, as Joy frankly told herself, was probably nothing else but pure jealousy. She had once seen Norman kissing this girl, and an exceedingly unpleasant gentleman with green eyes had been sitting on Joy's shoulder ever since, whispering nasty things into her ear.

As she went quietly and efficiently about her duties at the dinner table, Joy gave the impersonation of the perfect servant. When somebody cracked a joke and everybody else laughed, her elfin face remained as unruffled as a feminine edition of Jeeves. Imperturbable is the word. She was just a part of the food-supplying machine.

Nobody could have guessed that Joy was observing every flicker of expression which crossed the faces of Sir Hastings and his daughter. She had dismissed the guests as of no consequence. Even when Colonel Franklyn came bustling

in, full of loud apologies, she sized him up in one brief glance. Colonel Franklyn was a gentleman farmer of the horsey type, and his pleasures were huntin' and shootin' and fishin'.

"Deuced sorry to be late, Trevor—my humble apologies to you, Primrose—but I was delayed for a bit as I was passing the Hill Woods—right on the edge of my property, y'know," said the colonel, as he took his seat at the table and ran a hungry eye over all the eatables within sight. "Remember that tramp chap who was arrested for killin' Roper?"

"He left the village this morning, didn't he?" asked Sir Hastings. "I met Marshall, and he told me that the unfortunate fellow had been released——"

"Yes, but he's back again!" interrupted the colonel, digging a deep trench into the *hors d'œuvres* which Joy was proffering. "He went off with that young chap who's been stayin' in the village recently. Chap with a funny name. Can't quite recall it."

"Conquest, I think," said Sir Hastings. "He came up here once with that Scotland Yard man——" The host broke off and there was an awkward pause. Everybody knew that the body of Sangley, the murderer, had been removed from the Hall and taken to the neighbouring town of Studbury for the inquest. "A happy-go-lucky young fellow by what I saw of him."

"I liked him!" said Primrose, with frank enthusiasm. "The way he stood up for that poor little tramp and helped him was just splendid! You say the tramp is back, Colonel?"

"As large as life, and twice as natural," said the colonel, who was addicted to *cliches*. "Shaven, washed, dressed in new togs, and lookin' like another man. The thing which attracted me, though, was the marvellous caravan which I spotted just inside the Hill Woods. Gad, what a beauty! Must have cost thousands. Everybody in the village is talkin' about it, I understand. It seems that this Conquest chap brought the caravan here this afternoon behind the biggest car anybody's ever seen, and then went off again."

"More money than sense, apparently," grunted Sir Hastings.

Joy saw the quick flash of anxiety which flickered over the host's face; she saw him glance at his daughter, but Primrose, as serene and charming as ever, was looking at the colonel.

"How exciting!" she smiled. "I've often wondered what it would be like to live in a caravan."

"But, dash it, child, this caravan is simply colossal," said the colonel. "I went up and had a look at it. A saloon like the lounge of a millionaire's private yacht—luxurious sleeping compartments, kitchen, and every damned thing! The car, I understand, is a Packard."

"H'm! American!" said Sir Hastings, with a sniff. "I suppose that explains the caravan. Trust an American to have something bigger than anybody else has ever possessed! But I didn't know Conquest was an American."

Joy, watching for further signs, saw nothing. Primrose expressed only a casual interest in Norman Conquest, and either she had known beforehand that Norman had established himself in the Hill Woods, or the knowledge was of little interest to her. Hard to believe about a girl who had allowed herself to be kissed, and kissed passionately, by the young man only the night before.

When dinner was over, it was not long before the gentlemen followed the ladies into the spacious, old-world drawing room. It was nearly time for the news bulletin, and Sir Hastings was an ardent radio fan. Almost the first thing he did, on entering the drawing room was to switch on the instrument. The news followed shortly afterwards.

There was one item of quite sensational interest. A daring jewel robbery had been perpetrated during the evening. Lady Dalecourt's Mayfair flat had been entered and the famous society hostess had been robbed of jewels worth over ten thousand pounds. The announcer went on to describe an exciting race through the West End streets.

"The bandit car would have undoubtedly escaped from the police pursuers," continued the announcer. "It appears that a young man in a large and powerful Packard saloon took up the chase on his own initiative, and after daring the machine-gun bullets of the fugitives, he succeeded in forcing the criminals' car into a street refuge, where it overturned. Two men, with serious injuries, were removed to hospital, but we understand that the missing property was not recovered. The car was evidently used for the purpose of decoying the police, and there can be no doubt that this robbery is the latest exploit of the daring gang of jewel thieves which has been operating with such disquieting success during the past year."

Primrose Trevor took a cigarette out of her case and lit it with a rock-steady hand. She was well aware that her father had blanched and that he had allowed his own cigarette to slip through his stiffened fingers to the floor. The news item was a shock to them both. Norman Conquest again! None other but the daring young adventurer could have been sit-

ting behind the wheel of that big Packard! Even Colonel Franklyn commented on the coincidence.

"Young man in a powerful Packard, eh?" he said. That's deuced queer! This Conquest fellow is a young man, and he's got a Packard! Wonder if it could have been him?"

In the servants' hall, Joy was listening-in with some of the other domestics, too. Dawes, at the moment, was pouring himself a whisky and soda, and his air of casual interest was obviously forced. At least, it was obvious to Joy, whose every sense was super acute this evening. At the mention of the young man in the big Packard, Dawes slopped a considerable portion of his whisky and soda on the floor.

Joy began to readjust her focus. A little twinge of remorse crept up and down her slim body and finally gave a little jab at her heart. Perhaps she was only a jealous little cat, after all! Norman Conquest's interest in Primrose might not be the *affair d'amour* she had supposed. It was significant, to say the least, that Norman should have acquired an obviously bulletproof Packard and caravan and brought them almost to the doorstep of Bardlow Hall. It was even more significant that he should have gone straight back to London and butted headlong into a bandit chase. But these significant things paled when Joy recalled the reactions of Sir Hastings Trevor. Yes, there was a connecting link somewhere. If Norman had not been so beastly secretive, there might never have been any misunderstanding.

As Joy walked along the landing, about twenty minutes later, she tilted her little chin and put her heart, which was rapidly warming up, back into cold storage. If Norman chose to be such a chump, he deserved everything that was coming to him! She wasn't a bit sorry that she had acted on her own initiative. She was gaining some inside dope which might come in very useful.

All the same, that twinge gave another wriggle and hinted that she was playing it pretty low down by acting in this way behind Norman's back.

A rather strange thing happened at this moment. She was still on the landing and almost out of sight of the hall—the dusk was deepening, and the lights had not yet been switched on—when she heard a door opened with some violence, and she saw Dawes practically fall out of the library. He seemed to remember himself immediately afterwards, and after a quick look up and down, he hurried to the drawing room. And on the butler's face there was a very strange and startled look. Joy silently walked on towards the rear landing and she was glad that she had not been seen.

"Beg pardon, Sir Hastings, you are wanted on the phone," said Dawes unemotionally, as he stood in the drawing room doorway.

"Eh? Phone?" said Sir Hastings, who was talking politics with the colonel. "All right, Dawes. Excuse me, my dear."

As he and the butler crossed the hall, they said nothing, but Dawes gave his master a quick, intense look. Not a word was necessary. Sir Hastings entered the library and closed the door after him. Dawes went back to his pantry.

This was no ordinary call, as Trevor well knew. The ordinary telephone was intact on the desk. He sat down, opened the drawer and spoke softly into the slim mouthpiece of the secret phone.

"Well? Who is it? Trevor here."

"Captain Shanks, sir," came the thin, almost ghostly voice. "The Dalecourt stuff has gone."

"Gone! What the hell do you mean—gone?"

"Everything went exactly according to schedule, sir, and Nash contacted Walters at the appointed time. We locked the box in the usual place and prepared to push off."

"Then how can the parcel be gone?" snapped Sir Hastings. "If you locked it away——"

"A part of the steel plate has been cut through on the outside, sir," came the barge skipper's agitated voice. "The parcel was stolen *under water*, and the thief left a queer sign on the inside door—burned right into the steel. Just four numbers, sir—one, nought, six, six."

"One, nought, six six?" panted Sir Hastings. "What the devil does it matter what the numbers are? You must be crazy, Shanks! How could anybody——" He broke off and made sounds like Vesuvius in eruption. "One, nought, six, six!" he croaked. "Ten-sixty-six! Conquest's trade-mark!"

Sir Hastings fell back limply in the chair, and he could not have looked more bludgeoned if somebody had dropped a doorstep on his head. The Dalecourt jewels gone—an hour or two after the successful execution of the job! And Norman Conquest had not only performed this outrageous hijacking act, but he had left his visiting card!

"No! This is too much!" panted Trevor. "It's impossible! How could he have known——"

He broke off again, aware that the man at the other end of the line was speaking.

"... alarming, sir," Captain Shanks was saying. "We don't know where we stand. If the cops should be tipped off and the barge examined——"

"My God, yes!" interrupted Sir Hastings. "You'd

. . . Wait a minute! Conquest is not the sort of man to tip off the police. All the same, you'd better get your barge out into the river as soon as possible. Carry on as usual, Shanks. We'll do any necessary repairs at this end."

He put the telephone back into its cunning receptacle before the barge skipper could make any reply. For some moments Trevor sat motionless, striving to overcome the feeling of blanketing terror that was beginning to paralyze him. He felt the urgent need of advice. He forgot all the carefully arranged rules of the household, as insisted upon by Primrose, and rang the bell.

After a few moments, Dawes entered.

"You rang, sir?"

"To hell with your butler's prattle!" snarled the master of the house. "Go and tell my daughter that I want her in here at once."

Dawes stared.

"Is it quite wise, sir——"

"You heard me!" panted Sir Hastings. "Fetch her!"

He sank back into his chair as the door closed and wiped the streaming sweat from his face. Primrose did not come for some minutes and her father, unable to sit still any longer, got up out of the chair and paced up and down. If Norman Conquest's aim had been to give the opposition an attack of the jitters, he had succeeded like nobody's business.

When Primrose finally came in she looked serenely carefree—until she had closed the door. Then her whole expression changed, and she advanced towards her father with such menace and fury that he half backed away. One would not have been surprised to see her hair turning into snakes.

"You fool!" she whispered, with mingled contempt and rage. "We have guests in the house and you send Dawes——"

"But listen, Primrose!" panted her father. "Conquest has taken the Dalecourt stuff!"

This was practically a right to the chin, and Primrose rocked.

"Taken the Dalecourt stuff?" she repeated.

"Yes, from the barge! He cut a hole in the outer plates, which means that he must have been under water," said Sir Hastings rapidly. "He even burned the sign '1066' on the inner door of the secret compartment. If we don't kill him, Primrose, he'll ruin us completely."

The girl was staring straight ahead of her.

"Remember the night we dropped him in a weighted sack

to the bottom of the river?" she whispered. "Within an hour he was walking into our hall, as cool and immaculate as ever. And that night the Hotel Supreme stuff vanished!"

"God! You mean——"

"It fits like a glove," said Primrose tensely. "He was in the river, and he discovered the secret of the barge which was lying in the old lock. Today he knocked Nash cold and burned Nash's car. Somehow he must have discovered Nash's connection with Swinton's Wharf. Tonight he learned of the Mayfair robbery and went to Swinton's Wharf——" The girl's lip curled. "He's not so clever, this Conquest. He's smart, that's all—smart and slick and as full of energy as a dynamo. We've got to kill him, yes—but not until he's told us where he's hidden the two parcels."

She moved towards the door, taking her father by the arm.

"Listen, Dad, you've got to pull yourself together," she said urgently. "The game is dead safe while we keep to the rules. I don't think any harm has been done tonight, but it might be different if there were other people in the house. The vicar's crowd and Franklyn are featherheads anyway."

They passed out into the hall.

"Better think again, Primrose!" breathed Joy Everard, as she crouched behind the fire screen which filled up the unsightly gap of the fire place during the warmer months of the year. "There's been so much harm done tonight that they'll soon be dusting out a cell for you in Holloway!"

Joy had known that she was taking a big chance when she slipped into the library during the single moment when Dawes had had his back turned in the drawing room doorway. There was, apparently, no place of concealment in the room; the book cases and other articles of furniture were solid and far too heavy to move. But Joy was tiny, and she had insinuated her pixie figure into the old-fashioned fireplace and had pulled the screen back into its original place.

"So this is the charming little prairie flower that Norman's fallen in love with!" thought the girl, as she deftly emerged from her hiding place and ran to the door. "Primrose, my foot! Her name's Poison Ivy!"

She opened the door an inch and saw that the hall was empty. Serenely she emerged, and she was wondering more than ever if Norman Conquest was really in love with Primrose. This evening, apparently, he had been doing his stuff with all his old enthusiasm, and his object had been—loot. By this time he was probably back in the Hill Woods. . . .

Curiously enough, the same thought crossed Primrose

Trevor's mind at exactly the same moment.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DIRTY WORK AT THE OLD MILL

"WE LIVE in luxury, Brother Mandy," observed Norman Conquest, as he dived heartily into supper in the softly lighted saloon of the big caravan. "Fine furnishings, fine linens, fine silver and glass—and fine smells. Let's have a look what you've got under that dish cover."

Mandeville Livingstone, with a crinkly grin on his whimsical little face, prepared to remove the glistening dish cover.

"No, don't! Let me guess!" said Norman. "Why, you unprincipled poacher! I believe it's rabbit! And rabbit cooked over a smoky fire, forsooth!"

It was rabbit and the ex-tramp shuffled.

"Well, you see, guv'nor, I hadn't much to do, and there's rabbits in plenty in these woods," he explained apologetically. "Knowing how fond you are of——"

"Enough!" interrupted Norman gravely. "Eating food of this kind is half-brother to a religious rite, and there mustn't be any prattling chatter. Pull your chair up, serf, and pile in."

"Me, sir? I hope I know my place!" said Livingstone in a shocked voice. "Besides, I've had my supper. I'm your manservant, now, guv'nor, and my place is in the kitchen. I've got a nice cup of hot coffee when you're ready."

Norman announced that there was no time like the present, and he was in a very contented mood as he had supper. Parking himself on the opposition's doorstep, so to speak, tickled him immensely. Just as well that they should know that he was hot on the job. By this time they had learned all about the affair at Swinton's Wharf, and various plans were probably under discussion for his immediate and messy exit.

"We mustn't forget, bodyguard, that we live in times of stress and peril," said Norman, as he accepted a second cup of steaming hot coffee. "Certain evilly disposed gentlemen are likely to get busy at any minute, but a small thing like that needn't bother us. Let them take their pot shots; let them throw their bombs, and we should worry!"

"Gord love us, guv'nor, nothing like that can happen in a peaceful spot like this, can it?" asked the man. "I ain't scared—not while I'm with you, sir—and maybe it would be

a good idea if I was to stay on watch while you get your sleep. Just now you called me your bodyguard——”

“A mere figure of speech, old lad,” interrupted Norman. “Take my advice and get to bed. I can look after myself. I’m not turning in just yet; I want to smoke a few cigarettes and do a spot of thinking.”

His words had not been entirely facetious. He expected trouble during the dark hours of the night, and he meant to be ready for any brand that showed up. For an hour after Livingstone had gone to bed, he sat in the deep-seated lounge chair and smoked.

Primrose Trevor, a short mile away, was talking into the secret telephone, in the library at Bardlow Hall.

“If there is any slip-up this time, it might mean curtains for everybody,” she was saying in a low voice. “This man is as dangerous as a truckload of T.N.T. He thinks he’s very clever, planting his bulletproof caravan within sight of the Hall—and I believe I know why he has done it. If I am right, this plan of mine will succeed.”

“I don’t see how it can miss,” said a voice.

“Every plan can miss,” retorted Primrose curtly. “The finest plan ever devised was never foolproof. Conquest has got to die, but you’ve got to make him talk first. Now, have you got everything clear? Remember, there must be no hint that I’m connected with the job. Conquest will probably be obstinate, and we may have to keep him alive for days.”

Soon afterwards, when Primrose quietly stole out of a side doorway of the Hall, she was still wearing her simple evening gown, with the addition of a light wrap. It was a few minutes after midnight, and the servants had long since gone to bed, and all lights in that quarter of the building were out. The night was mild, with a half-moon peeping in and out of thick cloud banks.

The girl strolled quite leisurely and unconcernedly along the well-kept garden paths. Any wakeful domestic, happening to see her, would have thought nothing. It was not until she had passed beyond the boundary of the gardens that she hastened her steps. It was very essential now that she should not allow herself to be seen. Not that there was much risk. The people of Great Bardlow and district were generally in bed and fast asleep by eleven o’clock.

The fact that Primrose neither saw nor heard the lithe little figure in black which shadowed her from the house is no reflection on her sense of vigilance. It rather goes to prove that Joy Everard had adapted herself very completely to Norman Conquest’s mode of life. She had left her bed-

room as early as eleven o'clock and had then taken up a strategic position in the grounds. Before bedtime it had been the talk of the servants' hall that the "young man with the big black car" had come back to the Hill Woods. So Norman had returned, and there was every possibility that the fun and games would start.

Joy was not quite sure of her own feelings. She was rapidly coming to the conclusion that her own angle of the job was unnecessary, and that she might very easily gum up the works by acting as she was now doing. But some sort of a hunch or instinct, greater in strength than her reason, urged her to carry on. Her thoughts were all for Norman.

The village church was chiming the half-hour, and the night was broodingly quiet, when Norman Conquest yawned, stubbed out the end of his last cigarette and rose to his feet. Perhaps the opposition was not planning any dirty work tonight, after all. Anyhow, there was no reason why he shouldn't get some sleep—

Tap-tap-tap!

"Oh, yes?" murmured Norman, very softly.

In a flash, his every sense was keyed up to a high pitch of tension. He went to the window, from which the slight tapping sound had come, and parted the silken curtains.

He looked right into the face of Primrose Trevor.

Her blue eyes were wide and frightened, and her whole tender face was full of appealing entreaty. Her wavy blonde hair was slightly disordered, and she made a picture that bored into Norman Conquest's brain like a red-hot iron.

"Please come!" Primrose's mouth silently said.

Norman moved rapidly to the door, his heart making an absolute fool of itself, and his fingers were just on the handle when he checked. Caution, tottering on her pedestal, was yanked back all present and correct.

"If you think you're being clever, chump, try thinking on another wave length!" said Norman sternly.

He opened the door noiselessly and softly patted his automatic. Then he stepped out, closed the door behind him, and found Primrose by his side. Her white hands clutched at his arm and pulled at him.

"Oh, not here!" she whispered. "Somebody might see. It's dark over by the trees. I've got to talk to you. I'm so dreadfully afraid."

The fragrance from her hair did crazy things to Norman's wits, but to his credit it must be recorded that he entirely ignored her feminine appeal and gave all his attention to the gloom in the near distance. As they quickly moved towards

the trees, the Desperado's sense of caution was back at the old stand, doing brisk business. A dozen lurking figures could not have taken him by surprise. As a matter of fact, there was only one lurking figure at the moment and Norman did not see it. When it came to lurking, Joy Everard was hot stuff.

"Young lady, isn't this a bit rash?" murmured Norman. "If anybody should have happened to see you come to my caravan, it wouldn't do my reputation much good! You seem to forget that I'm a respectable and innocent young man——"

"Please don't talk in that joking way," interrupted Primrose. "There's no danger. There's not a soul within a mile."

"What about your stern parent? I always avoid trouble with stern parents in situations of this sort," said Norman. "They're apt to spring out on a fellow with guns—and double-barrelled guns at that! I know these country squires!"

"Please, Mr. Conquest," whispered the girl, pressing closer to him, and holding his two strong arms. "I know you're trying to comfort me, but please be serious. I'm afraid something dreadful is going to happen. I don't know what, but I couldn't sleep until I had come here to warn you."

Norman fought gamely, but caution tottered again and this time nose-dived.

"There's something quite wrong about this," he said softly. "You're the damsel in distress, and I'm supposed to do the knight-errant stuff. And here you are, risking your fair reputation to come and warn me——"

She shuddered and slipped nearer.

"I don't want you to be killed," she said, her voice charged with trembling fear. "Poor Roper was killed, and then Mr. Sangley, and—and—— I believe poor Dad is mixed up in it somehow, but when I question him he gets angry and tells me not to talk like a child. I don't know what to think."

If she did not know what to think, she knew what to do. And she did plenty. The perfume which arose from her in a subtle aura began to cloud his brain. Everything about her intoxicated him. Her soft, frightened breathing, the pressure of her little fingers, the yielding body which nestled closer and closer to his.

Only a dizzy moment—but how the poor sap fell!

His vigilance deserted him completely, and he took Primrose in his arms and kissed her.

"The big chiseller!" said Joy Everard indignantly.

She had a close-up view of the whole distressing scene, for she was doing her lurking act in the low branches of a neighbouring tree. Luckily, she made the remark to herself so nobody overheard it. Her little lips came together in a thin line and a sort of hot smoke came out of her eyes. So her first suspicions had been right all the time! No wonder Norman had told her to stay in Clacton! Well, he could get 'out of this jam in his own way—

And then Joy's heart nearly stopped beating. She had caught a glimpse of several dark figures, as silent as ghosts, creeping rapidly towards the pair, who were still locked in one another's arms. In spite of the burning rage which filled the girl like molten lava, she could not help admiring the devilish cunning of the plan. Primrose Trevor had chosen the one certain way of catching Norman Conquest off his guard!

And Joy had to watch—silent. If she uttered one cry of warning she would betray herself and would undoubtedly share the same fate as Norman. In agony she watched.

Suddenly the figures sprang. Two of them grabbed Norman Conquest from behind and dragged him back. Two others seized Primrose with brutal violence, and a hand was clapped over her mouth as she attempted to make an outcry. So silently was the whole thing done that Mandeville Livingstone, sleeping within ten yards, heard nothing.

Norman fought like a madman. Too late, his senses returned. His utter, incredible folly had brought danger upon Primrose! He saw one of the dark figures give the girl a cruel punch on the side of the head, and she fell to the ground in a huddled heap. Then a helmet-like contrivance was forced hard over Norman's head and pushed down to his shoulders. He heard a loud hissing, and his breathing became difficult. He knew that he was being gassed. He fought crazily, hurling his captors to the ground with him in a struggling heap. But that moment of carelessness had done the trick. It was too late now. His strength was ebbing, his senses were drifting away. He could hear the hissing noise increasing to a crashing of thunder, and utter blackness enveloped him like something solid.

It seemed to Norman that he dreamed. He saw Primrose in the hands of monstrous-looking demons, and they were prodding at her with three-pronged forks. They were in a dark and gloomy chamber, where an eerie, greenish light flickered from an alcove. He himself was dressed as a valiant knight in armour, and the visor of his headpiece had jammed. He wanted air. He was suffocating. He pulled

at the headpiece and jerked it right off his shoulders—and he opened his eyes.

It was no longer a dream. Somebody had just removed the curious gas helmet from his shoulders, and he was rapidly coming out of the dope. Everything was spinning round, but he could just make out that a faint light was burning somewhere. He could hear voices.

Things ceased to spin and his focus came back. He was in a musty, half-ruined chamber, and he guessed at once that he had been carried to the abandoned old watermill which stood on Sir Hastings Trevor's property. He saw that Primrose was being carried in the arms of a man who stood so deeply in the shadows that Norman had an impression, for a moment, that the girl's form was floating in mid-air. A thick muffler was tied about her face, and she was limp.

"Better make it snappy!" muttered a voice. "He's coming round."

"What'll I do with the girl?"

"We don't want her," said the first voice impatiently. "Chuck her in the storeroom there, and lock the door. We can deal with her later." He leered. "We might have time on our hands after we're through with Conquest, and she's as pretty a looker as I've ever seen."

The meaning of the words, seeping into Norman's semi-clogged brain, acted like a tonic. He suddenly braced himself and struck out with his right. At least, that was his intention—until he found that his right was lashed cruelly to his side. His left, too, if it came to that.

Inwardly, he groaned. He cursed himself for an incredible fool. He saw Primrose slung brutally through a doorway, and he heard the girl's limp body strike the bare boards of the storeroom with a thud. The door was closed and locked. By this time Norman was being half dragged, half carried along a stone-flagged passage in total darkness. He made a very curious noise as he was being dragged along, and the reason for this suddenly struck him. He had wondered why he felt so stiff. Now he knew. He was lying full length on a stout plank of wood, and he was trussed to the plank by means of a strong cord—his arms straight down by his sides, his legs outstretched. It was impossible to imagine a man in a more helpless position. All those little secret gadgets which Norman concealed about his person, and in which he took such mischievous pride, were useless!

"All right," muttered a voice. "Heave him up. Then you'd better bring the light."

The plank, with its burden, was lifted onto a great stone platform. A lighted lantern was produced from somewhere,

and Norman saw that a crumbling old stone object was towering against his head, a foot or so to his right. The lantern was set on the stone platform, and the figures of his captors came nearer. They were so heavily masked that he could see nothing but their menacing eyes. He could not even identify their clothing, for they had covered themselves with long black cloaks.

"All very effective, brothers, but I'm not a bit impressed," said Norman, with something of his old nonchalance. "If you're going to amuse me with a dancing skeleton——"

"Nobody's going to amuse you, Conquest," said a hard voice. "You're going to talk—and you're going to tell us what you've done with the Dalecourt sugar, and the stuff from the Hotel Supreme job. You'd better understand that we mean business——"

"Dirty business, I take it," interrupted Norman. "What is the nature of this binge? I don't quite like the look of this whacking great stone next to my head. Is it in any way connected with the dirty work?"

"Cool, ain't you?" snarled the man behind the mask. "But this time, 1066, it's curtains unless you come across. That stone, as you call it, is one of the big grinding wheels of the old flour mill. Hasn't been used for years, but still works. It weighs a ton or two, and I don't think it would do your head much good——"

"Spare me the lurid details," murmured Norman, his voice as tranquil as his quartz-grey eyes were calm. "I take it, then, that the program goes like this: If I don't spill the works, the wheel goes around and around, and I come out here—all over the floor, in a nice red mixture. Go ahead! Let's see the gadget in operation."

"You fool!" panted the man. "You don't seem to realize—— All right! I've dealt with stubborn cases before! We'll see what your nerve is like."

He gave a signal and Norman heard footsteps shuffling. His face might have been calm, but he was cursing himself roundly. He, Norman Conquest, who always prided himself on being a jump ahead of the opposition—here he was, as helpless as a sucking pig in the slaughterer's lap. And why? Because for one brain-reeling minute he had allowed his razor-edged vigilance to take a holiday! This was what came of mixing pleasure with business. Kissing a girl was all very well in its place. . . .

"You've got just one minute to make up your mind!"

The voice was hoarse and strained, and Norman judged that his captors were not regarding the affair as a picnic. He heard a low rumbling and grinding and the clanking of

rusty cogs. The great grinding wheel was evidently being operated by hand and, as the gear was low, the wheel's movement was so slow as to be almost imperceptible.

In spite of himself, the Desperado felt cold prickles attacking his skin. He was lying in such a position that the wheel would crush down with sickening force over his head. He could see it moving, creeping relentlessly forward and downwards. He could hear the hoarse, heavy breathing of the man who stood watching him. Apparently, the mechanism was operated at some distant point, for there was no sound of the other men. Only the clanking and grinding of the ancient machinery.

"Well?" The watcher's voice was cracking. "Are you going to break?"

"When this thing hits me, I shall burst," replied Norman Conquest calmly. "My poor fellow, if you think this bluff is fooling me for an instant——"

"It's not bluff!" almost screamed the other. "I've had my orders! You blasted young fool, if you don't speak, your head will be crushed like an egg. You've only got another twenty seconds."

Something slim and black moved behind the man. A piece of rock, hurled with unerring aim, struck the lantern and sent it toppling over. As it did so, it went out. Before the man could turn round with a curse on his lips, Norman heard the unmistakable swish of a skirt, and his heart jumped clean up into his lungs and nearly suffocated him.

Thud!

No need to wonder what that sound meant. Following it, there came a slight groan out of the darkness, and the sound of a falling body. Norman felt slim, cool hands touch him, and the plank was pulled out of the danger zone. A knife flickered, and he felt the cords dropping away from him one by one. He half struggled up, and his arms were free.

"Nice work, lady fair!" he said softly.

The machinery was still clanking, and the great stone was still grinding. The men operating the machinery had not received the signal to stop, and they were still carrying on. With a couple of tugs Norman freed his ankles, and at the same moment he found his automatic lighter. A click, and the little flame sprang to life.

Except for the masked man on the floor, he was alone. In fact, Joy Everard, by that time, was well on her way out of the mill. She had taken every imaginable chance, and by sheer desperate pluck she had won through. She had left Norman free, and she knew that he was capable of looking after himself. Her heart was like a lump of lead in her



breast, and in her bitterness she had left Norman to draw his own conclusions. Perhaps he would guess the identity of the girl who had come to his help! Indeed, if he had failed to recognize her touch, he must have drifted very far from her!

Norman Conquest wasted no time in that black chamber. He stumbled through a doorway, half ran down a passage, and then checked as an unsuspected door opened, flooding the passage with light.

Somebody stepped out—and he saw Primrose Trevor!

For the girl, the shock was almost exactly the same as a punch clean between the eyes. How he had escaped hardly mattered. She was standing right in front of him, and he obviously knew that she was one of the murder posse. For she was supposed to be lying helpless in a storeroom. The game, as far as her deception of Norman Conquest was concerned, was over.

Or was it?

Judgment on Norman must not be too harsh. He was a quick thinker, but he was no mind reader. The light was at Primrose's back, and he was unable to see the expression on her face. All he knew was that feminine hands had cut his bonds—and now, within three minutes, he saw Primrose, who had been brutally taken prisoner at the same time as himself, free! He jumped at the one obvious conclusion like a bull charging at a fence.

Without permitting her to say a word, he seized the girl in his arms and carried her swiftly to the end of the passage. He had felt a draught blowing from that direction, and he knew that a door must be there. He was right. The door was standing wide open and he carried Primrose out into the night. He carried her along the towing path and, as he did so, he chuckled gleefully.

"For a damsel in distress, you put up a pretty good show, old thing," he said dryly. "What was it you used to cosh the chief inquisitor? I couldn't see anything because you'd put the light out. By the way, how did you escape?"

Primrose Trevor was a quick thinker too. She had not the faintest idea who had gone to Norman Conquest's aid, but it was clear that he had been helped by somebody—and a girl! If he was willing to give her the credit, she might as well take it.

"They were careless," she whispered, her voice throbbing with tenderness. "I'm a girl and they thought I didn't matter. I found that the old door was cracked and broken, and I got it open. Then I heard that dreadful machinery and I crept along——"

She broke off with a choking little sob—not because her emotions were getting the better of her, but because she was not quite clear what *had* happened. She suddenly drew herself away from Norman as he set her to the ground, and ran.

“Here, half a minute . . .”

Norman took one or two quick strides after her, but then checked. Better, perhaps, to let her go. He gave a quick, searching glance around, remembering that the dirty workers were still fairly close at hand. He hurried away to his bulletproof caravan, and his heart was light.

Astute as he was in most things, he did not even guess that he owed his very life to Joy Everard, the pal he had forgotten!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE MAN WHO LOOKED FRIGHTENED

THE MORNING was warm and sunny, and the temperature in Norman Conquest's trailer-caravan was moderately high, for the sun had been shining on the bulletproof steel sides and roof since the comparatively small hours. It was not surprising, therefore, that Norman Conquest's knife, as he reached across the breakfast table, sank into the half-pound ornamental round of butter with complete ease. But it didn't sink far. It met with some strange resistance halfway down—and Norman went stiff.

The Hill Wood may have been a haven of sleepy restfulness—and indeed, it was—but as far as Norman Conquest was personally concerned, the place might just as well have been the crater of Vesuvius. His nerves were hair-trigger alert for the slightest zephyr whisper of danger; and when his knife refused to go clean through an ordinary hunk of butter, and soft butter at that, it was time to hold everything.

The danger-loving “1066” had found death lurking in many queer places during the course of his hectic and adventurous young life; and he was quite prepared to find death at its messiest in an innocent-looking half-pound of butter. An incautious jab with his knife, the intimate explosion of a miniature bomb, and what was the good of a bullet-proof caravan? A fat lot!

It was true that Norman Conquest had recently inspected the late Sergeant Roper's collection of Edgar Wallace thrillers, but he was the owner of a normal and healthy mind,

and his nerves were a mixture of tungsten steel and reinforced concrete. He had even seen "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" without once shielding his eyes or crouching under his seat. In a word, they don't come any tougher.

He drew the butter dish to his own side of the table and investigated. He used excessive caution. With a knife and fork he carefully teased the butter and was rewarded, after a brief search, by the discovery of a small spill of rolled-up, greaseproof paper. Not a particularly dangerous find, but interesting, nevertheless.

Unrolled, the scrap of paper revealed a couple of lines of doggerel in pencilled, printed characters:

"THE PRIMROSE IS SWEET WITH A DELICATE
SMELL—
THE COLOUR OF SULPHUR WHICH COMES OUT OF
HELL."

Into Norman Conquest's quartz-gray eyes came a flicker of understanding. He leaned back in his chair, breakfast forgotten, and lit a cigarette. In his open-necked shirt and immaculate flannels he made a perfect picture of a carefree young holiday-maker enjoying the rustic charms of rural Suffolk. Outside the open window, the view was enchanting, with the sunshine making fairy patterns in the grass as it slanted through the gently waving tree branches.

Fantastic to imagine that death could lurk amid such perfect surroundings! A ridiculous spot for the receipt of cryptic messages cunningly hidden in chunks of butter!

And not so cryptic at that!

There could be only one meaning to that atrocious couplet; it was intended as a warning against Primrose Trevor! It implied that the fair Primrose was a creature of hell. Which was not only libellous, but ludicrous. As Norman Conquest leaned back with half-closed eyes, he saw a vivid picture of the lovely girl in the blue smoke cloud from his cigarette; he saw her trim and graceful figure; her wavy blonde hair with the sun converting it into spun gold; he saw the sweetness of her innocent face, and the haunting look of entreaty in her fascinating blue eyes. A creature of the fair countryside, a very echo of the chaste purity of the woods and glens!

So clear was this picture, so completely had it implanted itself upon Norman Conquest's mental vision that not even a corner of his mind remained open to glimpse the sweet little pixie face of the best pal he had in the world! With great regret it must be recorded that Norman was in the

very middle of making a complete fool of himself. Joy Everard meant less in his life, at the moment, than the greenfinch which was doing a spot of carefree warbling on the bough of a neighbouring tree.

Norman Conquest threw his cigarette out of the porthole-like window and jerked himself back to realities.

"Hey, serf!" he sang out in a feudal voice.

The lounge of the luxurious caravan did not occupy the entire footage of the home on wheels; a panelled door opened, and a little man with a whimsical, crinkly face appeared.

"Want me, guv'nor?"

"How many serfs do you think I've got?" retorted Norman, as he slipped another cigarette between his lips. "I want to ask you a few questions, Brother Mandy."

The wiry little ex-tramp came forward into the lounge with an anxious look on his honest face. One hand held a half-peeled potato, and the other hand smoothed his green apron.

"Wasn't the bacon cooked just right, sir?" he asked, with concern. "I done it just as you told me—all crispy. I poached the eggs just four minutes——"

"It's the butter we're interested in, henchman—not the bacon and eggs," interrupted Norman.

Livingstone's eyes strayed to the disorderely yellow mess in the butter dish.

"Gord love us, what's happened to it?" he asked, in wonder. "That half-pound of butter was a fair treat when I put it in the dish, sir—with sheaves of wheat and acorns patterned on the top. Real pretty, I thought it was."

"The point is, where did you get it, and when?"

"Why, this morning, sir—from the dairy."

"Which dairy?"

"At the Old Mill Farm, just across the meadows," said Livingstone, still worried. "It's nearer than the village shops, sir, and I thought you'd like the farm butter best. I got it when I was fetching the milk."

Norman Conquest nodded.

"And the Old Mill Farm belongs to our charming country squire, Sir Hastings Trevor," he drawled. "H'm! There's something here I don't understand, Mandeville."

"Charming country squire!" Livingstone put fine scorn into his voice, and he forgot the dignity of his new position to such an extent that he spat out of the window in a very tramp-like way. "You know blooming well that this Trevor bloke has tried to kill you two or three times, sir! You wouldn't be fooling about down here, pretending to be on holiday, if you wasn't aiming to put it across the old

stinker!"

"An apt expression, Brother Mandy," said Norman, grinning. "Old stinker fits him like a glove. But we're drifting away from the main point. About this butter. You got it, you say, from the Old Mill Farm? How, exactly, did you get it? Was it handed to you——"

"No, sir. There were lots of half-pounds all laid out on the bench in the dairy, and I picked this one out because I thought it was the prettiest," said Livingstone. "Mrs. Higson—she's the farmer's wife—wrapped it up for me, and I paid her and came away. If it ain't good, sir, I'll take it back."

"If you picked it out yourself, I can't see how . . . But wait a minute." Norman Conquest gazed at Livingstone intently. "On the way home, my faithful seneschal, you met somebody; you stopped and chatted, and something happened to the butter . . ."

"Gord! You've got second sight, guv'nor!"

"No: I'm merely exercising the gray material. Tell me about this meeting, brother." Norman waved the other into a chair. "Tell me the Singular Story of the Substituted Butter. Spare no detail, for the most seemingly trivial point may be of the utmost importance. Proceed."

He placed the tips of his fingers together, lay back in his chair and closed his eyes. It was a pity there wasn't a violin handy. Mandeville Livingstone gave him a hard, searching look and proceeded.

"I didn't exactly meet somebody, sir," he said. "It was somebody who overtook me. A girl. She was running across the meadow as I was getting over the stile into the woods, and I wouldn't have seen her at all if she hadn't called to me."

"Ah! An ugly girl?"

"No blooming fear, sir!" said Livingstone promptly.

"She was the prettiest girl I ever set eyes on."

"Didn't you ever set eyes on Miss Primrose?"

"Her from the Hall, sir? She's a grand young lady, I dare say, and it ain't for me to compare her with one of the maid-servants." The little man's eyes sparkled. "That's who the girl was, guv'nor, and never did I see a neater picture than she made in her print frock and cap and apron. A little slip of a thing, with a face like a fairy and eyes just dancing with the joy of living."

Norman opened his eyes and inspected his manservant in surprise.

"Mandeville, you astonish me," he murmured. "I never suspected that you possessed this flair for picking winners."

Neither, for that matter, did I suspect that you'd have the village wenches actually running after you. Well, what happened? Did you date her up? Did you promise to meet her in the gloaming . . ."

"Come off it, gov'nor! She only wanted to ask me a few questions about you and your caravan. She ain't the only one, if it comes to that. Lots of people in the village are curious, and I don't wonder at it. I'll bet they've never seen the likes of this marvellous outfit! And me having been held at the police station for murder, and the village people knowing that I used to be a tramp—well, sir, it makes people ask questions."

"What sort of questions? This maidservant, for example? What questions did *she* ask?"

"Oh, about you, sir, mostly," replied Livingstone. "Who you were, and why you took me on, and if we're going to stay here very long. It seemed to me that she was a bit anxious like as if she was worrying about us. Then the next minute she was laughing and I thought maybe I was fanciful."

"And the butter?" Norman hinted.

"Why, yes, sir. The girl was just telling me her name—Mary Stevens, I think she said—when the church clock chimed the half-hour, and she said the cook would rap on at her if she didn't get back. She turned so quick that she bumped into me and knocked the basket out of my hand, and everything went flying. The butter, the eggs, a pot of cream—"

"And the girl was very sorry and promptly helped you to pick the things up?" drawled Norman. "She had a basket of her own, also containing farm produce. Easy enough for her to bung her own half-pound of butter in your basket while you were trying to rescue the eggs."

Livingstone scratched his ear.

"But what difference does it make, sir?" he asked. "Butter's all the same, ain't it? One half-pound is the same as any other."

Norman Conquest did not reply. He was leaning back in his chair, and his thoughts were smoking hot. This girl, Mary Stevens, a maidservant at Bardlow Hall, had deliberately made an opportunity to substitute the butter. Which meant that she had seen Livingstone making his purchases at the farm. Which also meant that she must have hastily scrawled the two lines of doggerel on a scrap of greaseproof paper and pushed it into her own half-pound of butter.

Why?

What was the object of going to such elaborate lengths for

the mere purpose of grossly libelling her mistress? This Mary Stevens was obviously no ordinary servant girl. The ordinary servant girl who takes a dislike to her mistress may set a lot of unpleasant scandal on its round, but she doesn't bury cryptic notes in half-pounds of butter so that they can be discovered by total strangers! There was something very remarkable and mysterious about the whole incident, and Norman decided that it was worth investigating.

"Brother Mandy, you're a sound sleeper, aren't you?" asked Norman suddenly.

"Me, guv'nor? Yes, I believe so."

"Nothing disturbs you in the night?"

"Why, no, sir."

"Then you'll be surprised to learn that sundry septic blighters grabbed me not ten yards from this caravan and carried me to the abandoned mill tied to a plank," said Norman leisurely. "In these mills, it appears, they use whacking great stone rollers, and the general idea was to put my head under one of them and convert it into mush."

"You're kidding, guv'nor!"

"I must confess to a moment of unforgiveable carelessness," proceeded Norman. "You see, I was chatting with Miss Primrose when the opposition pounced, and before I passed out I saw that the young lady was being brutally manhandled. Another lapse like that, my trusty batman, and you'll be out of a job. The present sound condition of my head is due to the fact that the opposition gave all its attention to me and none to the fair Primrose. They just bunged her in a storeroom to be taken care of later. Luckily for me, Miss Primrose took care of herself, and it was her gentle hand which came to my rescue. An experience, Brother Mandy, which gave me more than a jolt. Things have come to a pretty pass when the damsel in distress has to save her knightly companion from having his head pulverized. All wrong, brother."

Norman Conquest rose leisurely to his feet, and Mandeville Livingstone did not know how much of his fantastic story to believe. That his carefree young employer had told nothing but the literal truth was difficult to credit.

"Yes, sir," said the ex-tramp. "But what really *did* happen?"

"Haven't I just told you? Last night the fair Primrose saves my life, and this morning mysterious maidservants shove cryptic notes into my butter to the general effect that Miss Primrose's name is Mud. Queer goings on, vassal. We shall have to look into them."

Norman Conquest's idea of looking into the queer goings

on was to attire himself in his most sporting raiment and stroll off towards Bardlow Hall. He had no fear that the opposition would attempt to play tricks in open daylight. So he strolled towards the Hall openly and freely. It was always his policy to carry the fight into the enemy camp, and it would amuse him to see the colour of Sir Hastings' complexion when they came face to face. Also, he might catch a glimpse of the poetic genius, Mary Stevens.

He was in no hurry. The morning was hot and sunny, and he dallied by the wayside at various points to inspect the general landscape. He was particularly interested in the placid river and the tumble-down old water mill which could be seen across the meadows. He sighed. Such a lovely scene of rustic charm! And so accursedly deceptive!

Turning a bend in the lane, his eyes were feasted by a different brand of rural beauty. He was passing a neat white fence, and on the other side of the fence was the prettiest rose garden he had ever seen, backed by a trellis and creeper-clad cottage of unusual attractiveness. The one jarring note was the shiny trousers seat of the man who was bending over one of the flower beds, committing wholesale slaughter on a colony of well-nourished aphids, or plant lice. Green fly to you.

Norman was not particularly interested in roses, but even his flower-indifferent eye was attracted by the truly wonderful blossoms which made the little garden a riot of colour. And as it was his policy to make himself friendly with all and sundry, he switched on all the yumph he possessed and addressed himself to the shiny trousers seat.

"And when, neighbour," he inquired, "is the flower show coming off?"

It was a perfectly innocent and affable gesture. But the effect was extraordinary. Not that any ordinary or common-or-garden eye would have noticed anything particularly unusual. But although Norman's eye for roses was in the C3 class, his eye for peculiar reactions in total strangers was several shades better than A1.

The man in the garden raised himself to an upright position with an audible creak or two and turned round, revealing a mild, elderly, bespectacled face. There was just one hair-trigger instant of one-sided recognition, a stiffening of muscles, and a widening of eyes. And the eyes of the rose man, behind their lenses, were definitely frightened.

It was all over in a split second; it was over so quickly that if Norman Conquest had blinked, he would have seen nothing. The rose man was smiling at him in a genial way, wiping mangled aphid carcasses on his trousers seat as he

did so.

"Like my roses, do you?" he said easily. "You won't find any better between here and Kew Gardens. They reckon to have a show at the Hall, but you won't find a bloom to equal any of these. Aren't you the young man with the classy caravan?"

"The same," agreed Norman. "Conquest is the name—although I suppose you know that already."

"No," said the rose man. "I didn't know your name."

It was a foolish and unnecessary lie. He was not a sufficiently good actor to say the line with conviction. Norman Conquest took out his cigarette case and proffered it across the fence; and while he did so, his thoughts were doing a bit of rush-work. He had never seen this man before in his life; he had no interest in him whatever; no interest, either, in his garden. He had only started the conversation on a spur-of-the-moment impulse to be friendly with his nearest neighbour. It was not an occasion when his sixth sense, that trusty pal, had given him a warning jab in the ribs.

So the rose man's surprising reaction took Norman Conquest completely by surprise. He had recognized Norman on the instant, and the recognition had given him a scare. Why should this harmless-looking rose enthusiast get an unpleasant jolt at the sight of an immaculate young man whom he had never met? And why should he lie when the truth would have been just as easy?

"Thank you, Mr. Conquest, but I prefer my pipe," said the man in the garden. "Know anything about roses? Come in, if you like. I've got some beautiful *Etoile de Hollande* reds over by the house. These *Druschki* aren't at their best." He indicated some fine white blossoms with the hand which he had just ungloved. "The *Madame Butterfly* and the *Caroline Testout* are in nice condition, though."

Norman was more interested in the sensitive delicacy of the rose man's long white fingers than in his roses. But he pretended to be engrossed with the other's lively garden talk. Mr. Middleton himself could not have kept Norman more entertained.

But as the rose man's enthusiasm increased, so his listener's attention wandered. The rose man talked of Emma Wright and Lady Hillingdon and the Rev. F. P. Roberts and Walter C. Clarke and Margaret McCreedy and William Allen Richardson until he appeared to be reciting a hotel register. When Norman finally went on his way, with his head buzzing with rose names that sounded like highly respectable people, his inner brain was asking itself just one question:

Why should this harmless-looking old chap have been

frightened, and very badly frightened, at the unexpected sight of Norman Conquest?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE TIGRESS OF BARDLOW HALL

BREAKFAST at Bardlow Hall was a leisurely, pleasant meal. More often than not, the Trevors were entertaining a guest or two, and these good people, following the example of their host and hostess, were apt to wander downstairs just when they thought they would and help themselves to the eats from the buffet in the sunny breakfast room.

This morning, as it happened, Sir Hastings Trevor and his daughter were alone. The bluff, genial landowner was restless and worried; but the blonde-haired Primrose, looking very fresh and sweet in a gay summer frock, was serene and unhurried. When the parlour maid, Mary Stevens, was out of the room, Sir Hastings cast anxious and meaning looks at the girl, but she blithely ignored them.

Primrose was very pleased with the new maid's quiet efficiency. She was small and unobtrusive, well spoken, and quick in her work—and, in fact, as Primrose had confided to her father, almost too good to be true. Not a bad guess at that, for Mary Stevens was not true, and Primrose might not have been so pleased with the latest addition to the domestic staff if she could have known Mary's real identity.

Joy Everard was well on her toes this morning. Last night she had had grim and terrible proof that her time in Bardlow Hall was not being wasted. Her little chin had a firm and determined look. Norman had parked her in Clacton-on-Sea, with her aunts, and had told her to stay there. The poor fathead thought that he could handle this job alone, but since last night he had probably been turning mental somersaults. It gave Joy considerable satisfaction to know that she had succeeded where Norman Conquest had failed. Norman, the sap, had fallen for this modern Lorelei! One of these days, and before long, Mr. Wise Guy Norman was going to wake up with a jolt that would lift off the top of his head.

Not that Joy completely blamed him. Primrose Trevor was no ordinary siren; she was, in fact, the most bewildering person Joy had ever known. Joy was a girl of rare understanding, and she had sufficient faith in Norman to know that he would not have fallen for the wiles of any

designing miss. For once in his life he had come up against somebody who was as clever as himself—and probably a shade cleverer. The purity in Primrose's beautiful face had to be seen to be believed; the demure sparkle of her eyes was in itself a guarantee of her gentle nature. Even Joy, knowing all she did, found herself attracted by the other girl—attracted by some subtle influence, just as a gentle bird is attracted towards a deadly snake. Carrying dishes into the breakfast room this morning and hearing Primrose's lilt-ing laughter, Joy was compelled, more than once, to pinch herself, just to make sure that she was fully awake.

The thing that had happened last night . . . !

It was after nine-thirty before Primrose joined her father in his library. He had been waiting for over fifteen minutes; and in the complete privacy of that soundproof room he had been exploding curses at the rate of about sixteen a minute ever since he had entered.

Primrose joined him quite leisurely, a cigarette between her pretty lips, and the morning newspaper in her hand.

"Did you see this announcement of a new farm tractor, Dad?" she asked animatedly. "I think we ought to get one for the farm. The price is quite reasonable——"

She broke off, for she had just closed the door and she knew that her words could no longer be heard out in the hall. The change which came over her was so subtle that it was not at first noticeable. Her trim figure became tense; her mouth lost its beauty and became hard; her eyes went flat and cold.

"What's on your mind, Dad?" she asked coolly.

"My God!" Sir Hastings nearly choked. "You stand there and ask me what's on my mind!" He came nearer to her, his usually genial face distorted into a cruel twist, the sweat standing out on his forehead like drops of glycerine. "What happened last night? What went wrong? For goodness' sake, Primrose, tell me! You said you were going to dispose of Conquest, and I thought you had done so. Yet I understand that Conquest is still living in that cursed caravan——"

"There's no need to get so excited," interrupted Primrose coldly. "It's a damned good thing I'm here to keep you in check, or the police would have been suspicious of you long ago."

"Have I come here to be lectured by my own daughter?" almost screamed the landowner. "I'm in no mood for your high and mighty ways, Primrose! I know you're clever—so damned clever that you sometimes frighten *me*! You tell me there's no need to get excited, and Conquest is still

loose——”

“Loose, yes—but he’s not dangerous,” said the girl, taking a seat in the big easy-chair and crossing her shapely legs. “I’ve got Conquest just where I want him. He thinks I’m the authentic and original damsel in distress—the pure and gentle girl living in constant dread of her crooked father.” She laughed and the sound was like music, but music with a discord. “I’m rather glad that things *did* go wrong last night, for I’ve got Conquest in a tighter grip than ever before.”

“What the hell’s the good of getting Conquest in a grip?” asked Sir Hastings harshly. “There’ll be no peace of mind for us until he’s dead. Look what he has done already! He ruined all our plans regarding that infernal tramp fellow; he’s responsible for Sangley’s death, and he knows that my barges are used for the carrying of stolen jewels. What about the Hotel Supreme stuff? And Lady Dalecourt’s diamonds?”

“Before Conquest dies, he’s going to tell us just what he has done with that loot,” said Primrose, carefully. “Everything went like clockwork last night—up to a point. I got Conquest out of his caravan, and while I was letting him kiss me the boys did their stuff. They handled me with brutal roughness in Conquest’s sight before they gassed him. We got him into the mill as planned, and he didn’t come to himself until he was bound to a plank with his head under the crushing stone. Even then he didn’t see anybody. Crask was wearing a full mask, and the others kept in the background. I waited at the other end of the passage.”

She paused, frowning.

“And then?”

“And then,” said Primrose, “something went wrong. Crask’s story is this: Conquest refused to talk, and two of the boys went to the mechanism and started the crushing stone in motion. Still Conquest refused to spill anything. Then something hit the lamp and put it out, and in the darkness Crask got a blow over the head which knocked him cold.”

“But who—who——”

“It’s no good asking who. We don’t know. *Somebody* crept into the mill and cut Conquest free,” said Primrose deliberately. “And here’s the perfect climax, Dad. Conquest came stumbling down the passage, ran right into me, and *thought that I was the one who had saved him!*”

“You mean—he ‘doesn’t suspect you even now?’”

“He suspects me less than ever, if such a thing is possible,” replied the girl. “He didn’t see his rescuer—neither.

for that matter, did anybody else. Then he ran into me and I wasn't locked in a sinister cellar, but free. He jumped to the obvious conclusion that I had escaped from my brutal attackers and had then flown to his aid. And we still don't know who *did* help him."

"The tramp, Livingstone——"

"Livingstone was in the caravan, asleep, all the time."

"Didn't Crask see anything?"

"He saw plenty of stars, and I believe him," said Primrose. "There's a lump on his head like a tennis ball. Whatever happened, Dad, happened in total darkness, and Conquest assumed that I was the one who helped him. What we've got to find out is—who really did help him?"

Her father looked panicky.

"You see!" he said excitedly. "There's somebody else now! Conquest isn't here alone, as you thought. If the tramp was asleep last night, it means that Conquest has got a secret assistant. A Scotland Yard man, perhaps! If you can't see the red light, I can. It's time we got out——"

"Sometimes," said Primrose scathingly, "I wonder how you've kept yourself out of prison."

"Don't talk about prisons, you cold-blooded little devil!"

"Haven't we checked up on Conquest?" she continued. "Is he the kind of man to work with Scotland Yard? Conquest is a lone wolf. He's a hijacker. He's out for loot and doesn't give a damn for anybody. If we keep cool——"

She broke off. Something inside the handsome desk was softly clicking, and one of the inkwells began to glow with an intermittent orange fire. Primrose opened a drawer, touched a hidden catch, and removed the secret telephone.

"Well?"

"I want to know what to do!" came a voice so thin that it sounded scarcely human.

"What do you mean—you want to know what to do?" asked Primrose sharply. "What's the idea of ringing up at this hour, Blayne? You know the rules——"

"It's that blasted young Conquest!" came the agitated interruption. "He's been here—right in my garden. Spying on me! Pretending to admire my roses! He must be on to me, or he wouldn't have been so nosey."

"Tell me just what happened. Think carefully, Blayne, and give me every detail."

Primrose listened for a full minute, and while she appeared as calm at the end of the recital as at the beginning, her eyes were snapping dangerously.

"You fool, Blayne!" she said with chilling intensity. "If Conquest had had any suspicion about you he would have

avoided the meeting. If he guesses anything now, it's entirely your own fault."

"What if he speaks to me again?"

"Be pleasant. Give him your rose talk. String him along," said Primrose crisply. "You're all hypnotized by this Conquest man. That's the trouble."

She hung up the little receiver without another word, and when she turned away from the desk her lips were twisted into a contemptuous sneer.

"Why is it that all men are such cravens—such fools?" she demanded, with an overwhelming sense of her own power. "If only they would keep their heads!"

"What is it now?" asked her father.

"Conquest admires Blayne's roses, and Blayne immediately jumps to the conclusion that Conquest is on to him," said the girl tautly. "Do they think that Conquest is a mind reader? It makes me sick the way you all get the jitters at the very mention of Conquest's name! Dangerous, yes, but if we all keep cool we can deal with him."

"Conquest is poison!" said Sir Hastings pallidly. "How do you know that he hasn't spotted Blayne?"

She turned on him like a she-cat.

"You cringing, week-kneed, spineless rabbit!" she flashed. "Matthew Blayne has lived in Dawn Cottage for years; he's a retired civil servant and as harmless as a mouse. Season after season he has gone about the village, speaking contemptuously of our roses. We don't even know him! We pretend to be amused when his name crops up. How in the name of hell can Conquest be on to him?"

"I'm sorry, Primrose." Sir Hastings sat down heavily and dabbed his beaded forehead. "You're right, of course. You're always right. Blayne was a fool to get scared. Plenty of people pause as they pass his garden and admire his roses. It's only natural. He's got a marvellous show." He hesitated. "All the same, wouldn't it be better to get out?" A pleading note came into his voice. "Why not destroy everything, Primrose? Wipe it all out before Conquest can destroy us? If we do that, we needn't fear him a bit. If there's no proof— Why do you look at me like that?"

"Go on!" said Primrose evenly.

"I don't feel like going on—now."

"I don't wonder," said the girl with scorn. "We spend years building up this organization; we safeguard ourselves in every possible direction, and even when Scotland Yard men come right into the village they suspect nothing. We've got a dozen big jobs lined up, and the money is safe. And you talk of quitting!"

"But we've got plenty now," urged her father. "The flour mills are making big profits——"

"Where did the capital come from—to operate the flour mills?" cut in Primrose. "The mills are our cover—so is the farm and the estate. Do you think I put my brains into this racket for seven years, only to sacrifice everything at the very hour when we can make a really big clean-up?"

"But Conquest . . ."

"Until Conquest came along, you were as hard-headed and shrewd as any man living," said the girl. "You attended to your end of the game efficiently and coolly. Pull yourself together, Dad! The set-up is perfect. We're county people, rich, influential. Every aristocratic door is open to us; we join house parties up and down the country; we go to the Riviera; we mix with the people who matter. In this way we get the inside dope, with no danger of suspicion. Then at the right time, the boys make their grab—and the stuff comes back to us. Then it vanishes. Scotland Yard is up against the toughest proposition it's ever tackled, and until we make a slip it'll get nowhere. Are we going to be panicked into quitting by one man? I've got Conquest where I want him, and he's as good as through!"

"By God, Primrose, you give me confidence again!"

"Conquest always works on his own, Dad," said the girl easily. "No matter what he guesses, he won't split. All we've got to do is to mark time for a week. Give him rope. He can't strike unless he's got something to strike at——"

She broke off as a tap sounded on the door—delivered on the little brass knocker. The door was not locked and after a moment Dawes, the butler, entered, bearing a salver. There was a strange look on Dawes' face.

"A gentleman to see you, miss," he said woodenly.

Primrose Trevor picked up the card which lay on the salver. The name on it was "Norman Conquest."

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE GREAT BETRAYAL

THE BIG LOUNGE HALL of Bardlow Hall was a place of mellow lights and shades, with the sunshine streaming in through the hospitably open front door; with wide windows allowing their casement curtains to drift lazily in and out on the morning breeze; with the massive old grandfather's clock tick-tocking dreamily and staring without a blush at the nude figure of Psyche opposite.

Norman Conquest liked this lounge hall, and he lounged accordingly. He could detect the hand of Primrose Trevor in the daintiness of the curtains and the distribution of the flowers. Immaculate in his flannels, the young buccaneer looked a very part of the sunny morning. Inwardly, he was chuckling. It amused him vastly to beard the opposition under its own roof.

While he was waiting for Dawes to return he strolled about, inspecting the fine old paintings; and he scarcely heard the opening of the swing door which communicated with the domestic quarters.

A small, slim girl, carrying a tray appeared. Joy Everard looked ridiculously dainty and pretty in her maid's cap and apron, and for many reasons it was regrettable that Norman did not see her. One sight of that bright elfin face would have explained much to him—while leaving one or two points, possibly, obscure. He would, at least, have known the real identity of "Mary Stevens," even if he failed to understand her motive for warning him against Primrose.

Given time—a matter of one short second—he would have seen her face. But Joy saw him first, and Joy performed the smartest right-about-face on record. All Norman Conquest saw, when he glanced round, was the rear view of a singularly neat and trim little maidservant. For a fleeting second something stirred at the back of his mind; some little chord of vague recognition was touched; but it was so illusory that it made no lasting impression, and his mind switched on to another track. He wondered why the girl had entered the hall, only to beat a hasty retreat. His eyes hardened slightly. This was the girl who had sent him the cryptic butter message! He took leisurely-looking but rapid strides towards the service door.

Joy, on the other side of the door, was standing with tightly compressed lips and stubbornly tilted chin. She was intensely angry with herself—angry because her heart was giving an exact imitation of a pneumatic drill. She wondered why the other servants didn't come rushing to the spot to find out the cause of the din. It was a pity her heart couldn't behave itself! Norman Conquest meant nothing to her—less than nothing. If he preferred to make love to hell cats disguised as damsels in distress, it was his own funeral.

Joy would not admit to herself that her pride was lacerated and her heart bludgeoned. She would not even admit that she had entered this house for the one and only purpose of helping her man. Therefore, at the first fleeting sight of him, she instinctively beat a rapid retreat. Her emotions were inextricably tangled. Reason, loud-voiced and decisive,

urged her to go through that doorway and tell the poor chump what brand of dynamite he was handling. But pride, in the form of a dull agony, held her rooted to the spot where she stood.

"Will you come this way, sir?"

Norman Conquest was checked by the suave voice of the butler while he was still some yards from the service door. Unconventional as his actions generally were, he could not very well barge into the domestic quarters of the house under the very eyes of Dawes. He turned and found the butler regarding him with that detached superiority which is the hall mark of the true major-domo.

"And how," drawled Norman courteously, "are we sleeping these nights, retainer? Well, I trust?"

"Yes, thank you, sir."

"No nightmares?"

"None, sir," said Dawes stolidly.

He did it quite well, but his eye control was definitely Grade C. With Norman Conquest's quartz-grey points of devilment gazing challengingly into his, Dawes nearly fell apart. He only saved himself from disaster by walking as sedately as he could manage to the library door.

"Mr. Norman Conquest," he announced thickly.

Norman entered the library with the air of Robert Taylor making a personal appearance. His tumultuous welcome, he seemed to feel, was a foregone conclusion.

"Come in, Mr. Conquest—come in!" said Sir Hastings Trevor breezily, with invisible syrup trickling out of his mouth, and providing the tumultuous welcome as per scenario. "Delighted to see you again, young man. You know my daughter, don't you?"

"We've met, yes," smiled Norman, bowing gracefully to Primrose. "I've never quite forgotten how your daughter rallied to the help of that poor little tramp, sir. A great little chap, Livingstone. I've given him a job as my man-of-all-work."

"So I understand."

"I fell in love with this countryside of yours and decided to carry on with my holiday," continued Norman glibly. "But there's one little point that's worrying me, and I thought it ought to be cleared up. I believe I have parked my caravan on your property, Sir Hastings, and I am here this morning to ask official permission to remain there."

He knew perfectly well that Hill Woods did not belong to Sir Hastings, but this excuse for his morning call was as good as any other.

"You have been misinformed, Mr. Conquest," said the

landowner, with his most genial smile. "The woods belong to Colonel Franklyn of the Hill Farm. Won't you sit down, Mr. Conquest? Try one of these cigars. You needn't worry yourself a bit. Colonel Franklyn lets anybody use the woods."

"Well, that's fine," said Norman, dropping elegantly into the most comfortable chair. "Thanks for inviting me to sample your Coronas, squire, but I'll stick to the gaspers, if you don't mind. Lovely place you have here." He waved a careless hand towards the windows. "So peaceful; so redolent of old-world tranquillity."

He beamed upon Sir Hastings and his daughter through the hazy blue smoke of his cigarette. It seemed to him that Primrose was inwardly agitated and was having some difficulty in keeping up her pose of polite attention. Her father was frankly uneasy; for the second time that morning he was sweating.

"Yes, it's charming—charming," he agreed, unaware that his smile closely resembled the opening stages of an apoplectic fit. "Very pretty country round here. Are you—er—thinking of staying long?"

"Oh, for quite a spell," drawled Norman Conquest. "There are certain business people who wish me to curtail my holiday and go on a long trip to a hot climate, but I find the temperature of Great Bardlow quite warm enough. These people are in the jewellery business——" He paused politely. "You were saying, Sir Hastings?"

Sir Hastings was saying nothing; he was making choking noises, rather as though he had accidentally swallowed the lighted end of his cigar. Primrose, who was sitting in such a position that her father could not see her face, gave Norman a half-frightened, half-pleading look. So brilliant was her histrionic ability—a brilliance which amounted to sheer genius—that Norman felt a little pang. But he had another thrust for Sir Hastings which he could not possibly resist.

"Well, I suppose I'd better be pushing off," he said, as he rose lithely to his feet. "Many thanks for making me so welcome, Squire. Oh, by the way. About the old mill——"

"The—the what?" gurgled the stricken landowner.

"The old abandoned water mill by the river," murmured Norman serenely. "That property is yours, surely, Sir Hastings? Any objections to my pottering about in the old place?"

"None!" Trevor fought gamely with his vocal chords. "None whatever!"

"Thanks a lot; I might like to use the mill as a spot for undressing when I take a dip," explained Norman, his eyes full of mischief. "I've been in the river once and I found it most enjoyable."

It was, indeed, the thrust direct. Norman knew that Sir Hastings Trevor had had a hand in that murder scheme when he had been secured, naked, in a weighted canvas sack and dropped to the bottom of Deadwater Deep. Sir Hastings, for his part, knew that Norman knew. Yet here they were, squire and visitor, chatting this and that, and keeping up the great pretence.

"I'll tell you what." Primrose jumped up laughingly to her feet and ran across to Norman. "We'll go to the old mill together and I'll show you over it. Some of the old floors and stairways aren't safe, and if you go by yourself you might break your neck."

"Impossible," said Norman promptly. "My neck is guaranteed unbreakable. The truth is, it's made of rubber, and accounts for my propensity for displaying a rude and unwarrantable interest in other people's business. Hence the term—rubber neck. The patent is registered in my name."

Primrose laughed with infectious merriment, and as they passed out of the library and went out into the open sunshine, arm in arm, they made a perfect picture of two young people going off on a carefree holiday jaunt.

As they went through the gardens and across the daisy-strewn meadows, the girl kept up a happy chatter, and her sunny laughter did queer things to Norman's blood pressure. He knew well enough that she was acting and he was filled with a great wonder. He was also fooled up to the eyebrows and his brain was on vacation, but he was unaware of these details.

It was after they had plunged into the cool, shadowy interior of the old mill that Primrose Trevor changed. In the privacy of that old mellow ruin, she suddenly came to an abrupt halt and gripped both of Norman's arms with her white little hands. He could feel the quivering of her slim body rippling down her arms like an electrical discharge.

"Oh, why did you torture Father like that?" she whispered tremulously. "Why did you openly challenge him?"

"Not openly. I rather thought I was subtle."

"It makes no difference," panted the girl. "I shall have to suffer. You don't know what he's like when he's angry!" She shuddered and crept closer to him. "I'm afraid—so terribly afraid!"

Norman's jaw became like a chunk of granite, and he took

her by the shoulders and then tilted her sweet face upwards until he was looking right down into her terrified blue eyes.

"Listen to me, Primrose," he said almost fiercely. "I want to know the truth. You're going to spill the whole works. This man isn't really your father, is he? What hold has he got over you?"

"Oh!"

It was a little sobbing cry of consternation and amazement. Norman's chin, after a brief struggle, ceased looking like a chunk of granite and became jellified. He could no longer resist the sweetly appealing lips which quivered so temptingly just beneath him. He took a swift nose dive. His lips pressed down upon hers; and she, far from withdrawing in simulated innocence, gripped his arms with passionate fervour, pressed her quivering body closer to his and gave him the works. Norman's temperature rose to boiling point, and if he had been fitted with a steam gauge it would have exploded like a mine.

His nose dive became an uncontrolled tailspin, and the crash could have been heard for miles. Norman was no trappist monk, and he had been kissed by girls before, and by girls in certain quarters of the world where kisses are guaranteed to raise blisters; but never had he experienced anything like Primrose Trevor's technique. After about two minutes the marrow in his bones had turned into molten lava, and his wits, what remained of them, were scattered some miles over the Essex border.

She managed to disentangle herself from the clinch and stood back in the cool gloom, looking at him with such an expression in her eyes that Norman gave an exact impersonation of Goofy. Her lips were trembling and her softly rounded breasts were agitated. She suddenly averted her face and snuggled her blonde head onto his chest.

"I love you!" she whispered. "Nothing else matters! I'm yours! You're so big and strong—so brave!"

Primrose nearly overdid it. But she had gauged her man—and his present condition—to a millimeter. At any ordinary time, with his brain hitting on all cylinders, Norman might have regarded that little speech with definite suspicion. But at the moment he was not himself. He was in very much the same condition as an Ogpu chief on trial for his life in Moscow. Primrose's words struck him as being the most natural words in all the world; the logical outcome of events which had gone before. He felt good.

"You've got to let me help you, Primrose," he said softly.

They were both calmer now, and in the half-light Primrose looked indescribably angelic. Her sweetly pretty face was

half in shadow, and her expression was one of shy maidenly surrender. Norman Conquest felt about twice as big as usual, and the poor fathead hung on her words like any rustic hick.

"But you can't help me," she said tremulously. "All I want you to do is to go away. I'm so—so afraid! Afraid for you! After what happened last night——"

"Yes," said Norman. "What *did* happen last night?"

"It's all like a dream—now," she murmured, snuggling closer to him again. "Those dreadful men locked me in a storeroom, and after they had gone I found that I could get out. The door was broken. I heard voices and crept along the passage and—and saw what was happening to you. Oh I was so frightened!"

"So frightened that you saved my life?"

"I found a stone and threw it at the lamp, and I hit the man on the head with a lump of wood I had picked up," she continued. "He didn't even see me—neither did you. I just cut through your ropes and then ran out."

The actions she was describing were the actions of the mysterious unknown person who had actually gone to Norman Conquest's help. She watched his face closely, and she was satisfied that he still believed that she was his rescuer. If he had been putty in her hands formerly, he was now a mere sponge, to be squeezed into any shape she desired.

"The thing that happened last night might happen again," said Norman, trying to get some strength into his voice. "But I'm not likely to be caught napping twice, and you needn't worry your head about me. You're the worry, Primrose. Your father——"

"Please don't ask me any questions."

"But hang it, you've got to tell me——"

"I don't know anything," she interrupted breathlessly. "At least, very little. I know that my father is mixed up in some criminal work, but I've never been able to find out what it is. By day, everything is so calm and peaceful and serene that I sometimes think I have been having nightmares."

Her slim body shook and there was a little catch in her breath.

"It's at night, after everybody is asleep, that the strange things happen," she whispered. "Sangley, my father's secretary—the man who committed suicide—he was the cause of it all. He had Dad in his power, I believe. He killed Sergeant Roper—killed him because he had found things out." This time she shuddered as though an icy chill had struck her. "At night, too, mysterious men come and go."

She looked up into his face pleadingly. "Oh, I know you want to help me, but you can't expect to fight them all single-handed. I'm safe. They won't harm me. Please go away—please forget everything you have seen and everything you suspect. Won't you?"

"If you think——"

"For my sake?"

There was a world of tremulous appeal in her soft, caressing voice, and she looked up into Norman Conquest's eyes in a manner that was calculated to melt the heart of an income tax inspector. He wilted. It required every scrap of his determined will to refuse her.

In revealing the Gay Desperado as a human being, as distinct from a go-getter with a thrill-a-minute complex, judgment upon him must not be too harsh. Admittedly, he had been as blind as a bat where Primrose was concerned from the very first; and now he was practically a total loss.

Instead of raving at Norman Conquest and calling him the world's prize dumbell, have a go at admiring Primrose Trevor's incomparable genius. Her fiend's heart was masked by as fair a body and as saintly a face as ever woman possessed. Matching her fairness was her cool, calculating, dominating brain. But for that criminal kink, she was the kind of girl who could have sat in the executive chair of a great business concern and conducted it with smooth, brilliant efficiency. Had she been a man, Norman's guard would never have been lowered; but she was the most feminine thing he had ever seen; the very sight of her quickened his pulses, and her touch acted like a quart of chloroform on his brain. That bosom pal of his, his trusty sixth sense, went down for the count every time he came within a yard of Primrose.

"If you think," repeated Norman firmly, "that I can forget you and everything else, you'd better start again at scratch. You've got to remember that certain epizootic blighters have tried to separate me from my breath on two or three occasions in this rural haven, and while I'm mentioning no names, I mean to square the account. I'd feel a great deal freer to act if you weren't in the picture. Don't think because I'm single-handed, that I'm going to lose this game. In a very short time there's going to be a crash that will tear Great Bardlow wide open."

"No, no! you can't——"

"Sorry, lady, but it's just got to be done," continued Norman almost gruffly. "That's why I want you to clear out now—before anything happens that might hurt you. What's to prevent you going?"

"Oh, you don't understand," breathed Primrose tremulously. "I can't betray my own father—I can't desert him. He is my father, God help him! And where can I go? I mean, without Father knowing? I have friends all over the country, but I couldn't ask them to keep my presence a secret. I'd need money too——"

"You could get money, surely?"

"I told you that you didn't understand," said the girl, in a sad, low voice. "Every thing looks so happy and homely at Bardlow Hall, but if you only knew the truth . . . ! No, no, I can't go away."

Norman decided not to press her. She was trembling now, and he was afraid that she might break down altogether—a fine tribute to her superb acting.

"Well, there's something else I wanted to ask you," said Norman Conquest, on the brink of a plunge which, had he known its true significance, he would have cut his tongue out sooner than take. "What about the servants at the Hall?"

"I'm secretly frightened of Dawes," replied Primrose promptly. Had she been less clever, she would have pretended to know nothing ill about Dawes; but she was certain that Norman was "on" to the man, and it was good strategy to say that she feared him. "I don't think Dawes is an ordinary butler. I've never seen anything wrong, but I sort of *feel* that he and my father have secrets between them."

"And the other servants?"

"They're all right—all of them," said the girl. "Most of them are from the village hereabouts. I'm not frightened of the servants," she added, looking at him in surprise. "Why do you ask?"

"Is Mary Stevens a local girl?"

"Why, no." This time Primrose's surprise was genuine. "She's new. I'm very pleased with her too——"

"Then don't be so pleased," interrupted Norman, continuing his mile-a-minute plunge into the Great Betrayal of his staunch little pal. "I think you'd better watch Mary Stevens."

"Watch her! Whatever do you mean?"

"Until I know something more definite, I'd rather not go into details," answered Norman. "But I can tell you this much: Mary Stevens is no ordinary parlour maid, and she loves you just about as much as Herr Hitler loves Comrade Stalin."

From this minute onwards the life of Joy Everard was in deadly danger—thanks to the crass folly of Norman Conquest, the man whose life she had saved at the risk of her

own scarcely twelve hours ago!

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE SCENT OF A ROSE

PRIMROSE TREVOR was utterly startled.

She gave no hint of her inward agitation, however, and the silence between her and Norman Conquest, which followed, and which lasted for some moments, was partly due to the fact that Norman himself was beginning to regret that he had mentioned "Mary Stevens." After all, he really knew nothing against the girl except that she slipped ridiculous messages into half-pounds of butter. She could hardly be a fully fledged member of the official opposition, or she would not have gone to such pains to send her warning message. And the message was a warning against Primrose, of all people! It simply didn't make sense.

Primrose's own thoughts were up in the nineties. She had scarcely given the new parlour maid two thoughts since she had engaged her—except to register full marks for the girl's neatness and all-round efficiency. She suddenly remembered that she had been rather careless about Mary's references. She had checked them, it was true, and she had phoned to the girl's former employer in Clacton-on-Sea. Everything had seemed all right. Was it possible that she had been "planted" in the house? If so, by whom? Scotland Yard? Primrose's thoughts soared into the hundred-and-tens. Perhaps that apple-cheeked Inspector Williams, who had looked so friendly, hadn't accepted the glib theory that Sangley had committed suicide!

"Why do you say that Mary Stevens doesn't like me?" asked Primrose suddenly.

"Eh? Did I say——?" Norman paused and laughed. "Skip it. I don't even know the girl; haven't even seen her. Call it a hunch. The chances are, I'm wrong. Let's get back to the more important subject of *you*. If only you could get completely away from this place and leave me a clear field——"

But Primrose was as clever as ever. She had professed her love for Norman Conquest; she had him well and truly on the string, and she was artist enough to know just how far to go. Before he could stop her, she had run out of the mill into the sunshine. Norman subconsciously noticed that everything in the old place had an air of neglect and

decay. He knew quite well that it would be a waste of time to explore. The people who had brought him into this place, to murder him, were not the kind of people to leave any tell-tale traces.

He found Primrose, looking more ravishing than ever, standing by the lock. Her smile, when she turned towards him, was the gay, happy smile of a girl who hadn't a care in the world.

"It's been nice, showing you over the mill, Mr. Conquest," she said demurely.

"What," asked Norman, staring straight at her, "is the big idea?"

Her eyes flashed a brief warning signal.

"I shall have to go—really," she said in a low voice. "If Dad thought you were getting too friendly with me . . . Please understand!"

With a light laugh she ran off across the meadows towards Bardlow Hall. Norman watched her go with a feeling of mingled disappointment and relief. The remembrance of that kiss caused his toenails to assume a permanent wave, and some unsuspected heating apparatus in his interior mechanism was raising the temperature of his blood to boiling point. At the same time, he was worried. He felt that the presence of this girl, living right in amongst the opposition, was going to cramp his style more than somewhat. It was a problem which would have to be dealt with in due course.

Meanwhile, he was cursing himself for making Primrose uneasy about that young chump of a parlour maid. He frowned with irritation. There was something all wrong about that butter incident. Such an absurd, melodramatic warning—absurd, because anybody with half an eye should know that Primrose Trevor was a gift from heaven rather than a product of hell; melodramatic, because it didn't ring true. Servant girls, who wished to knock their mistresses, just didn't act as this girl had acted.

Norman returned to the mill, and for his own satisfaction explored it from dusty cellars to cobwebby attics. It was, as Primrose had said, in a state of advanced decay in spots, and caution was necessary unless one was looking for a broken leg. Some of the upper floors were so rotten that they would not bear the weight of a child.

It was the ground floor which interested Norman, particularly the chambers containing the grinding stones, and the rusty mechanism. The cellars, to, came in for a careful inspection. He remembered how, on one occasion, he had intercepted a parcel of jewels, the loot of the Hotel Supreme

robbery, on its way under water from a moored barge to the wall of the old mill. A certain section of the cellar wall was next to the river; but, explore as he might, he could find no method by which the parcel could have found its way through.

Feeling more dissatisfied than ever, he returned to the sunshine and strolled into the village. Here he renewed his acquaintance with Mr. Reeves, the landlord of the Red Lion; he chatted with the girl in the post office, and the aged proprietor of the tobacconist's shop, and by the time he returned to his caravan he was in possession of some interesting information.

The rose man's name was Matthew Blayne, and his charming little home was known as Dawn Cottage. He was a retired civil servant, and he had lived in Great Bardlow on a modest but comfortable pension for the last seven or eight years. His cottage was "done" daily by a lady who rejoiced in the name of Mrs. Martha Rudd, and who was the village carpenter's wife.

All very respectable. All very commonplace. If one takes the trouble to look, one can find retired civil servants living on comfortable pensions in almost every square mile of the British Isles. The countryside, in fact, is congested with them, and fresh supplies are being unleashed monthly by a kindly government.

Matthew Blayne apparently lived for his roses. When autumn came he virtually hibernated until the following spring, and during the summer months his cottage was more of less superfluous, except as a kind of shelter, to be dodged into when it rained.

Why should a man like this, so harmless and rose crazy, allow stark fear to leap out of his eyes at the moment of his recognition of Norman Conquest? If he was as respectable as he appeared to be, Norman would have had less effect upon him than a passing bee.

And those hands!

Hands with the sensitive, delicate fingers of a craftsman—an artist—a composer, yes. A gardener, no. Your true rose grower, he who lives for nothing else, is utterly contemptuous of protective gloves; his hands are horny and rugged and earthy and scarred.

Norman Conquest found his thoughts straying constantly towards Mr. Blayne during the day. He appeared to be frankly loafing, but he made one or two interesting preparations in the caravan lounge while Mandeville Livingstone thought he was indulging in a nap. Norman had made up his mind to investigate Mr. Blayne and Mr. Blayne's cottage

—and it was something more than a hunch.

In the early evening Norman took another stroll to the village. As he had expected Matthew Blayne was in his garden, pottering about among the roses. Mr. Blayne was facing the road and he saw Norman at once. His cheery hand wave was so prompt, in fact, that one might have supposed that he had been watching for Norman's appearance.

"Ah, Mr. Conquest, coming to have another look at my roses?" said Blayne genially.

Norman opened the gate and walked right in, meeting Blayne in the middle of the little lawn. His quick eye had noted that the front door of the cottage stood wide open, and he knew—because he had taken the trouble to find out—that Mrs. Martha Rudd had left over an hour ago.

"That little chat we had this morning, neighbour, made me rose-conscious," remarked Norman, with a smile. "I've always known, of course, that roses are beautiful flowers; but until you gave me your high-pressure talk I had had no idea that they were of far more importance than the situation in Central Europe, and the Far East. Incidentally, feast your eyes on this posy."

He produced a red rose of such exquisite, velvety perfection that Matthew Blayne gave a chirrup of delight, dropped his gardening tools, and adjusted his spectacles. He took the rose from Norman's hand almost reverently.

"This is indeed a magnificent bloom," he said enthusiastically. "I didn't know that such prize specimens were to be obtained in the village."

"If you think it looks nice, brother, wait until you get a smell of its perfume!" said Norman. "Unique is the word. I've smelt a few roses in my time——"

He paused. Mr. Blayne, after a tentative sniff, had given a little start. Now he was burying his nose into the flower and deeply sniffing its exotic fragrance.

"But this is amazing!" he exclaimed, almost excitedly. "Unique is indeed the right word, Mr. Conquest! I've been growing roses for twenty years, and I have never produced one with this peculiarly powerful scent. May I be permitted to know where you obtained it?"

Norman laughed.

"You'll probably kick me out of your garden, Mr. Blayne, but it's only my fun," he chuckled. "I understand that in your opinion of Sir Hastings Trevor's rose garden is low in the extreme. I couldn't resist the temptation to pluck one of the squire's roses and bring it along."

"Indeed!" Mr. Blayne spoke coldly. "I certainly had no idea that Sir Hastings grew such wonderful roses as this."

He suddenly broke into a laugh. "After all, you caught me very neatly, didn't you? I admit that I have expressed a prejudiced opinion of Trevor's roses—— Really, I'm sorry—— How extraordinary! I'm afraid I don't feel quite well."

He had taken his pipe from his mouth, and he would have fallen if Norman Conquest had not caught him as he was saying this. His knees began to sag.

"You've been in the sun too long."

"No. The sun never affects me——" Blayne made a tentative move towards the house. "Do you mind? I feel quite dizzy and faint."

Norman recovered Blayne's pipe just as it was falling from his hand and propelled him through the rambler-clad porch into the neat, tiled hall. The door of the living room stood wide open, and Norman steered the now half-fainting man to a chair. In just ten seconds Blayne sank back, definitely "out."

"Many thanks, brother," murmured Norman Conquest coolly.

He carefully placed Blayne's pipe on a little table nearby. He looked at his watch. Blayne had taken a satisfactorily deep sniff of the rose and its cunningly concealed "knock-out" brew. Norman had the cottage to himself for five minutes at the least, or ten minutes at the most. By that time the last of the vapour would have evaporated from the rose and it could be examined with impunity.

The Gay Desperado's first task was to open his pocket-book and remove a sheet of prepared paper. It was stiff, almost like cardboard, with a slightly waxy surface. Carefully, but with speed, he pressed the unconscious man's fingertips to the prepared paper. First one hand and then the other. Blayne's fingers showed no trace, and yet the impressions were perfect.

Slipping the paper back into his pocketbook, Norman took another look at his watch and then closed the front door. Four and a half minutes left. He made a quick tour of the cottage—a brief enough task, for there were only three downstairs rooms—the sitting room, a big, comfortable living room-cum-kitchen, and a spacious scullery. Upstairs, Blayne's own bedroom in the front of the house, a plainly furnished guest bedroom at the rear, and a lumber room. There was also a small, well-equipped bathroom.

Everything was very neat, very clean, and very much as you would expect to find in the cottage home of a retired bachelor civil servant.

Norman was not disappointed—yet. He had expected to find everything normal. Mrs. Rudd came into this house

every day, and Blayne's very openness indicated that he had nothing whatever to hide. Perhaps he hadn't. Perhaps Norman's suspicions were just plain cuckoo.

There was definitely nothing upstairs. Not even an attic, or a locked room which Blayne might have labelled "private" from the daily woman. Just two minutes left.

Norman gave Blayne a quick glance and was satisfied. His eyes roved like searchlights over the neat furniture of the sitting room. No time to go through the drawers or cupboards. He went back to the sprawling kitchen and then had another look into the scullery. A big rush mat in the middle of the scullery's stone floor caught his eye. He moved it. Underneath, a square wooden trap, with a sunken rim. Norman heaved up the trap and flashed his electric light.

Just a well such as nine country cottages out of ten possess. The light flashed on the water far below at the bottom of the circular shaft. He closed the trap, replaced the rush mat, and was about to go out when his eye caught a ladder, fixed to the wall in a dark corner. He flashed his torch. At the top of the ladder there was a square trap, obviously leading to a loft.

Less than a minute left.

He ran lightly up the ladder, pushed open the trap, and swung his light round. A loft, sure enough—a loft half-filled with rubbish and with dust lying thickly. Nobody had been in this loft for weeks.

He lowered the trap, and was on the point of descending when his eyes were attracted by a curious detail. The ladder was not fixed to the wall, but it hung on two metal projections which were slotted. There were hooks on the ladder to fall into the slots. Both hooks and slots were shiny. Peculiar that this ladder should be moved so frequently. Perhaps Mrs. Rudd used it for cleaning windows and other odd jobs about the house.

Norman hurried back to the front room. The last few seconds of the five minutes had ticked away. Matthew Blayne had not altered his position.

When he stirred, just a minute and a half later, he had no feeling of faintness—no consciousness of any lapse of time. The front door was still wide open and Blayne's pipe, with smoke curling lazily from the bowl, was in his hand. Norman Conquest was standing at the sideboard pouring out some whisky.

"Thought you'd rally round with a drop of this stuff," said Norman leisurely. "Feeling better now, Mr. Blayne? I thought you were going to pass right out."

Blayne took the whisky and sipped some of it. His hot pipe was uncomfortable and he put it on the table. Everything he saw indicated that he and Norman had only just entered the room. The dizziness had passed, and there were no after effects.

"Well, really, it's most extraordinary," said Blayne, in a tone of annoyance, as he rose to his feet. "I can't understand what came over me. I've never had a dizzy spell in all my life."

"There's always got to be a first time," laughed Norman, as he and his host strolled out into the little garden once more. "You know, this sun is pretty strong and you might easily have caught a touch of it. What happened to that prize rose of mine? Ah, here it is."

The rose was lying on the lawn where Blayne had dropped it, and Norman took a deep sniff and then slipped the rose into Blayne's lapel buttonhole.

"Perhaps you'd like to keep it?" he suggested dryly.

With a chuckle he went on his way, and Matthew Blayne stood looking after him with a curiously intense expression in his eyes. There was fear too—but no definite suspicion. Nothing had happened, as far as Blayne knew, to indicate that Norman Conquest was specifically interested in him or the cottage.

"Damn him!" muttered Blayne, plucking the rose from his lapel and staring at it. "Was it just a joke, or is he noseey? I don't believe he got this rose from the Hall garden, either. Trevor couldn't grow roses like this in a hundred years!"

The seeds of doubt and uncertainty were sown in his mind, and he took no further enjoyment in his garden. Meanwhile, Norman Conquest was equally doubtful and equally uncertain. Perhaps the rose man was okay, after all. If he wasn't, those finger-prints would at least determine if he had a criminal record. Some distance up the lane, Norman paused and jumped lightly to the top of the bank to examine some wild creepers. The winding nature of the lane was apt to give one a false idea of distances. In order to get to Bardlow Hall, one had to enter the village and take another road. A full mile, at least. By looking over the hedge, Norman saw, through intervening clumps of trees, that the Hall was actually quite near.

"Prepare supper for ten o'clock, goodly knave," said Norman, when he got back to his camp. "I feel the urge for a little action."

"You're going somewhere, guv'nor?" asked Mandeville Livingstone.

"Just for a run," replied Norman. "I don't suppose there'll be any trouble at this end, but don't stray far from the ancestral doorstep, and keep your eyes skinned and your ears uncorked. We live in stirring times, Brother Mandy, but I have a fancy for doing most of the stirring myself. I don't want to come back and find that the opposition has converted you into a mere memory."

The little man scratched his ear.

"This opposition you keep talking about, guv'nor," he said, puzzled. "I don't seem to catch on. There's been dirty work, as you might say, because Sergeant Roper was snuffed out. But that Mr. Sangley man killed him and then Mr. Sangley committed suicide. Is there anybody else?"

"And how!" laughed Norman, as he climbed into the big Packard. "But I don't think they care much for the colour of your blood, Mandeville. It's mine they want to analyze."

He was off before the little ex-tramp could ask any further questions. His "run" took him straight to London and to Scotland Yard. During the journey he had kept constant vigilance, but nothing untowards had happened. At police headquarters he presented himself to Chief Inspector Williams.

"So this, Bill, is where you fill up your Littlewoods'?" observed Norman courteously, as he cast an eye round the severely plain office. "I don't think I like it. Haven't they forgotten the rich pile carpet and the Dunlopillo chairs? A man of your prominence——"

"You haven't come here to talk about my furniture," interrupted Mr. Williams, casting a speculative eye over the tall, lithe form of his visitor. "What's the trouble, Conquest? Is it really necessary to shift all those things so that you can sit on the corner of my desk?"

"Do me a favour, Sweet William." Norman carefully placed the sheet of prepared paper on the inspector's blotting pad. "Fingerprints. Perfect specimens, though I say it myself. I have half an idea that the chap may be on your visiting list. Can you instruct certain of your hirelings to give these the official once over?"

"Whose fingerprints are they?"

"That's what I'm asking you to tell me."

"I mean, where did you get them?"

"If you're going to spoil everything by being inquisitive, I shall have to take them to some other firm," said Norman threateningly. "I come here, putting business right in your hands, and all you can do——"

"All right—all right," interrupted Mr. Williams patiently. "We won't argue." He pressed a button and thereby set

certain machinery in motion. "Are you going to wait, or shall I deliver the information in a plain van?"

Norman Conquest grinned.

"Bill, you're improving," he said, helping himself to one of the inspector's cigarettes. "If it's all the same to you, I'll wait."

During the interval of waiting, Mr. Williams was very polite and very pleasant; and all the time he kept a wary eye on his visitor. What was Conquest doing with himself these days? Still down at Great Bardlow? Well, well! Not that Trevor girl, surely? Mr. Williams, ruminating, observed that he had an impression that Norman was already tied up with the Everard girl.

"I'll trouble you," said Norman, almost savagely, "to mind your own damned business!"

He regretted the outburst as soon as he had uttered it, for he was by nature an even-tempered and, indeed, sunny dispositioned young man. But that reference to Joy had jolted his conscience like a red-hot needle in a decayed tooth. He was thoroughly aware of the fact that he had, of late, allowed young Pixie to drift right out of his memory. The trouble with Norman Conquest was that he had the skids on and didn't know it.

There was a sticky silence for the rest of the wait. Mr. Williams was reflecting on the fickleness of youth, and Norman was inwardly cursing himself for having spoken to the apple-cheeked inspector so rudely.

A man in uniform came into the room and placed something on Mr. Williams' desk. Williams gave a casual look and then made noises which suggested that he was being throttled.

"Cartwright!" he gurgled thickly.

Norman beamed; he was charmed with the reaction.

"Friend of yours?" he suggested.

"How the hell did you get these fingerprints?" demanded Inspector Williams, rising from his chair and clutching at Norman's arm. "Look here, Conquest! I don't want any of your blasted nonsense! You're going to tell me——"

"No need to get so excited, brother," drawled Norman. "I know where Cartwright is and he's staying put. Are you anxious to meet him by the way? It's a bit thick, to leave me in the dark like this. You get that paper, you pretend to have a fit, you yelp 'Cartwright' and you expect me to know the answer. He's not Cartwright these days."

"I didn't expect he would be," growled Mr. Williams, subsiding back into his chair. "You want to know who the man is? Only the cleverest diamond faker ever known to

the police!"

"Tell me more!" murmured Norman happily. "Bill, I never suspected that your voice could contain such music!"

So his hunch about Matthew Blayne had rung the bell!

"These fingerprints are undoubtedly those of William Charles 'Joburg' Cartwright," said Williams slowly. "Born in Johannesburg, he has been 'in' diamonds all his life. Until he was twenty-five he was a respectable clerk in the offices of the De Beers Company. Then he got mixed up in an I.D.B. job, but nothing was proved against him. Drifted to Amsterdam and learned the mechanics of diamond cutting and the handling of precious stones generally. After that he drifted some more—the wrong way. For years he worked for certain London fences, recutting stolen stones. He was sent down in 1915 for seven years." The inspector was consulting the dossier. "Sentenced again in 1922 for a ten-year stretch. Out on ticket in 1930—and has never been heard of since."

"Until now," supplied Norman gently.

Williams looked at him hard.

"And you're rustivating in a sleepy Suffolk village, and you find Cartwright living there under another name——"

"Did I say that?" drawled Norman.

"Think I'm dumb?" rapped out Mr. Williams, rising to his feet again. "By God! Is Cartwright mixed up in the Big Racket?"

"What Big Racket?" asked Norman innocently.

"Don't pull any of that baby-face stuff on me, Conquest—I'm not in the mood for it," growled the inspector. "You know exactly what I mean. All the precious stones that have been stolen in big jobs for years past have never been traced. Conquest, you've got to tell me where Cartwright is and what he's doing—or pretending to do. You're not staying down at Great Bardlow for your health——"

"How right you are, Bill," said Norman. "Great Bardlow, in my experience, is just about as healthy as a Guatemalan snake swamp."

"You're not staying there on account of that girl, either," continued Williams. "What about that diamond earring you gave me the day after Roper was murdered? That was part of Lady Launceston-Bevan's jewels, worth eighty thousand pounds, stolen some weeks ago. Roper knew something and the fool kept it to himself—and he's dead." He looked straight into Norman's calm, half-amused eyes. "You know a hell of a lot more, Conquest! I'm coming back with you to Bardlow——"

"Better think again, Bill."

"You can't withhold vital information," protested the inspector almost excitedly. "You're the most damnably exasperating young fellow I ever set eyes on! You're never satisfied unless you're playing games! The people behind this big racket have made the greatest clean-up since Morgan sacked the Spanish Main, and we've never been able to get a line on them. If you can help——"

"I can help plenty—but in my own way—and at my own time," drawled the Gay Desperado, flicking a cigarette into his mouth and snapping his lighter into flame. "Bring your storm troops down to Great Bardlow and you won't get a smell of Cartwright or anybody else. Give me a day or two, and I'll hand you Cartwright on a plate."

"But——"

"I'll be even more generous," promised Norman, setting his cigarette at a rakish angle, his quartz-gray eyes glinting into the inspector's like chips of ice. "I'll make it a dish, Bill, and the dish will also contain the ringleader of the Big Racket."

He nodded a careless good-bye and strolled out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

PRIMROSE SEES THE LIGHT

DINNER at Bardlow Hall, that evening, was the usual happy, carefree meal. There were one or two casual guests, and Primrose Trevor was more charming than she had ever been. Perhaps she was cloaking the fact that her mind was not completely at rest; she was also keeping a secret and watchful eye on Joy Everard, who was going about her duties with all her customary smooth ability.

Discerning as Primrose's experienced eyes were, she could not see how this slight, elfin-faced girl could be dangerous. Hitherto, she had regarded "Mary Stevens" as just a servant girl, and she had scarcely given her face any attention. Even at the opening interview she had only given the new maid a cursory once over and had found her appearance satisfactory. Servant girls came, and servant girls went, and Primrose had more important things on her mind. But today, in consequence of Norman Conquest's strange warning, she had seized every opportunity to observe "Mary Stevens." Now, at dinner, Primrose was troubled by a vague, illusory impression that she had seen the girl before. Or perhaps she had heard the girl's voice. Some nebulous chord in her memory was vibrated by a zephyr touch.

And Primrose was so disturbed that, as soon as the guests had gone, she joined her father in the library and threw off her mask of gay girlish happiness. She effected such a quick change that Sir Hastings, himself intensely worried, was inclined to adopt a superior tone.

"You see?" he said harshly. "I'm not the only one with nerves. I've never known you to act like this, Primrose. This damnable Conquest has got us both down. Why don't you seriously consider the question I made this morning? There's time for us to destroy the evidence——"

"I'm not thinking about Conquest," interrupted Primrose, frowning. "It's this Stevens girl. Why did Conquest warn me against her? If she is associated with the police, Conquest would have known, and he would have protected her——But would he?" she asked suddenly. "Conquest hates the police. He's as much against them as we are. He always plays a lone hand."

Sir Hastings coughed.

"Not always." He hesitated. "I seem to remember something of the Voegler affair. There was a girl——"

"A girl?"

"Yes. Conquest had a girl with him. Everest, or Evermore, or something. But it's absurd. Conquest wouldn't double-cross his own——"

"Wait—wait!" Primrose's voice was sharp, and her eyes were twin points of intensity. "Remember the night I had to shoot Sangley?"

"Really, Primrose, there's no need to remind me——"

"While you were upstairs with that Scotland Yard man, Williams. I took Conquest outside and made him believe that I was half-fainting with fright. He kissed me. A car came up and there was a girl in it."

"Yes. I remember you telling me——"

"I didn't see her because of the glare of the headlights, and I ran indoors immediately," continued Primrose. "He called her Pixie, and said he had told her not to come. By God! She saw him kissing me and she wouldn't let him talk to her. The car was off a moment after it had arrived."

Primrose's brain was almost smoking. Suddenly, she went to a drawer and took out a little writing block on which she had made a note. She lifted the receiver of the ordinary telephone and dialled a Clacton-on-Sea number. Her face was calm and unruffled as she waited.

"Miss Bloom?" she said sweetly. "Oh, I see. Miss Bliss? Could I have a word with Pixie?"

She tensed herself. This was the test. "Mary Stevens" had given Miss Bloom and Miss Bliss as her former em-

players. If the girl's references were genuine, these good people would know nothing about a person called "Pixie."

"You mean Miss Everard?" came a gentle voice. "I'm afraid she's away just at present. If you'll tell me——"

"Oh, it's all right," said Primrose, in her most charming voice. "She told me she was going away, but I thought she would be back by now. I'm one of her girl friends. It doesn't matter at all."

She hung up before the kindly Miss Bliss could ask any further questions; and her face was distorted with fury and mystification.

"Everard! That's the name—Joy Everard! I remember now," she said tensely. "There's something damned funny about this, Dad!"

"You call it funny?" asked her father, his voice rising shrill. "Conquest's girl friend planted right inside our house!" The sweat began to ooze out of him. "Didn't I tell you that we're sitting on a ton of dynamite? Heaven alone knows what she has found out!"

"Whatever she has found out, she has kept it to herself," retorted Primrose coldly. "That's what I can't understand. If she was in cahoots with Conquest he would have kept quiet about her—even to me. Besides, it's all wrong. It doesn't add up. Conquest doesn't do things in this slipshod way. The girl doesn't even make any attempt to cover up!"

"There's no accounting for anything that this young devil does," said Sir Hastings hoarsely. "He's reckless. He just doesn't give a damn. I've been reading up——"

"She comes here as Mary Stevens and gives me references from these Bloom and Bliss creatures," continued Primrose, concentrating so deeply that she ignored her father's interruption. "And she does this the very day after she had found Conquest kissing me! Did you put that advertisement in the local paper as I asked you?"

She did not wait for his reply.

"Dad, I've got it!" She laughed with relief. "When that girl came here, pretending to be a maid, *she merely thought that Conquest had fallen for me and was giving her the double-cross in love!* She had no suspicion that he was on a real job. That's why she made no attempt to cover up!"

"Trust you women to understand one another!" said her father, dabbing his forehead nervously. "I dare say you're right. I'm sure you're right. But does it improve the position? The girl's almost as clever as he is and——"

"Where I'm concerned, she's ten times as clever as Conquest," interrupted Primrose with conviction. "I fooled him, but I haven't fooled her. She knows that I'm involved with

you and Blayne—and that's why she gave Conquest a secret warning against me." A light of complete understanding blazed in her eyes like an unholy fire. "Get it, Dad? It was this Pixie girl who cut Conquest free the other night. She must have trailed me from the house and she knew that the attack on me was a fake. Conquest sensed that it was a girl who had helped him, although he saw nothing owing to the darkness. And he thought I was the one!"

"Good God, Primrose, this is ghastly!" bleated Sir Hastings, all his nerves in tatters. "Conquest is as dangerous as hell, but he's only been *guessing*. This girl *knows*!"

"But she hasn't told him—yet!" flashed Primrose. "That's where we score."

She lit a cigarette jerkily—a sure sign that her iron will was affected. Young ladies in the best circles are not supposed to sweat, but Primrose was beginning to sweat now. She and her father, between them, were filling the room with B.O.

"This little twit of a girl, because her pride is hurt, fakes her way into our house as a maid-ervant and she might have gummed up the whole works," said Primrose, closely resembling the Wicked Queen in "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," after she had changed into a witch. "But we're in time, Dad. We're just in time. She knows so much that she's got to vanish—tonight!"

"Listen, Primrose! You're not suggesting——"

Primrose touched the bell push.

"Roper knew too much, and you know what happened to him," she said composedly. "This girl knows that Conquest is on a real job; she knows that he has been fool enough to fall for me. She's through. It's only her pride that has saved us so far. If her pride hadn't been hurt she would have gone to Conquest and spilled the whole set-up. At any minute she might change her mind and we're not taking any chances."

The door opened and the butler entered.

"Come in, Dawes," said Primrose evenly.

He knew what that meant. He closed the door so that no word of the ensuing conversation could reach the hall.

"Do you know where Mary Stevens is?"

"The new parlour maid, miss? Upstairs. I think, turning down the beds."

"Bring her here."

There was such cold venom in Primrose's voice that, for once, Dawes forgot the inexorable rule of the organization and dropped the butler-and-mistress attitude.

"Bring her here!" he repeated, his eyes opening wide. "Why, what's wrong with the girl?"

"Plenty! She's not as innocent as she looks. Bring her here, and be careful. She's dangerous. That's all."

"You don't mean she's mixed up with Conquest?" asked Dawes hoarsely. "Why, she's not that sort——"

"Dawes!"

"Yes, Miss Primrose," muttered Dawes, stiffening.

In a very butler-like way he went out of the room, closing the door. In the empty hall he cursed the regulation which forbade familiarity. Primrose had not told him that the parlour maid was connected with Norman Conquest, but he was good at guessing.

He went upstairs quickly. He had had a lascivious eye on Mary ever since she had arrived, and although she had rebuffed his tentative advances on two or three occasions he had still been hoping for the best. The knowledge that she was something more than a maidservant gave him a nasty jolt.

On the landing he saw that the door of Primrose's bedroom was wide open and there was a light in the room. A little metallic slithery sound told him that Joy was pulling the window curtains. He lounged into the doorway.

"Finished here, Mary?" he asked carelessly. "You're wanted downstairs."

Joy turned with a bright smile.

"Shan't be a tick."

And her heart changed gear. Ever since dinnertime she had been on the feather-edge of alertness, and the carelessness in Dawes' voice was overdone. She would have noticed it at any time; but just now it acted on her very much as a thunderclap might have done. She fiddled with the curtains.

During dinner she had been aware of an electric tension. Several times during the day, in fact, she had caught Primrose covertly watching her. At dinner, Primrose's watchfulness had been intensified, although she had striven hard to conceal her attentions.

Now Dawes came and spoke like a ham actor! To a girl of Joy Everard's speediness of wit, plus her training at Norman Conquest's hands, the signs were ominous.

She turned from the window, picked up a feather duster she had been using, and went towards the door. She pretended not to look at the butler, but she saw that his eyes were full of a light they had never before contained. Leering admiration, yes. Obscene desire, yes. He had looked at her in such ways many times since her arrival. But now his eyes burned with ill-concealed suspicion and antagonism.

"They don't usually want me at this time of the evening," said Joy lightly. "What am I on the carpet for?"

"How should I know?" retorted Dawes, taking a familiar grip on her slim arm. "The mistress says she wants you in the library. I didn't say you were on the carpet."

Again that careless note. Again it was overdone. The man's disclaimer was significant; he was trying to put her at her ease. And at the same time his grip on her arm tightened.

Dawes, after all, was a clumsy fool. Primrose Trevor should never have trusted him with the task. Joy, fully understanding the dangers of this house, knew, with a certainty that crashed like an explosion, that she was "rumbled." She was being taken downstairs to that soundproof library to be grilled. Her sixth sense, which was as acutely developed as Norman's, told her that this was the psychological moment for her to quit. Failure to do so of her own accord would result in her making a totally different kind of exit—a swift, permanent exit of Primrose Trevor's contriving.

In a word, it was time for Joy to resume the *anschluss* with Norman Conquest.

Dawes still held her arm as they moved towards the top of the wide staircase. Here, where there was a chance that other domestics might see them, he loosened his grip. It was all Joy needed. As they commenced to descend the stairs, she deftly hooked her little foot round the butler's ankle as the latter was taking his first downward step.

It was beautiful to see.

Dawes, utterly unprepared for the move, tripped and took a headlong plunge. He was on the inside of the staircase and there was no bannister for him to clutch. His hand slithered uselessly against the wall.

Thud! Bump! Crash!

Dawes took the stairs mainly on his left ear. It took him about five seconds to reach the hard floor at the bottom, and he had only touched a stair or two. But how he had touched! There was a large mat at the bottom and Dawes spread himself out on it, a total loss.

Primrose and her father, attracted by the ominous sounds—Primrose had deliberately left the library door ajar in order to give it a careless look—ran out at once. They found Dawes of no immediate use as a butler. He was a heavy man and that fall had altered his shape considerably. His left leg was twisted underneath him in such an unnatural attitude that it was very obviously broken. Blood was streaming from a gash in the side of his scalp, and his left ear was nearly torn from its moorings. Nothing was now

needed but a shovel and a sack.

"The girl!" hissed Primrose between her teeth.

"Where?" babbled her father.

She made no attempt to answer the footling question. She left Sir Hastings to attend Dawes—a fat lot of good doing that—and raced upstairs. After she had searched the house from top to bottom, she was inclined to echo her father's query. Where?

Mary Stevens had quit her job without notice.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

AN UNDERGROUND TUNNEL—OF COURSE!

NORMAN CONQUEST was the old gay, irrepressible "1066" on his way back from London. He drove the Big Packard with a song on his lips and with a yeasty feeling in his heart. His nostrils twitched with the scent of coming battle.

Now that he knew the rose man's real identity, he could go right ahead into action. No reason for any further delay. He had been hesitating and dallying, and footling about generally, purely on account of Primrose. He did not want to do anything that would hurt her. Well, why should she be hurt? Nobody was going to blame her for the crookedness of her father, and he would be there anyway to take care of her.

Rather a pretty thought, that. No good being a knight-errant unless you were prepared to take care of distressed damsels left stranded by circumstances! The time to worry about Primrose and her future was after the battle.

So Norman Conquest, for the first time since he had entered this adventure, more or less dismissed the fair-haired, blue-eyed girl from his thoughts and metaphorically buckled on his sword.

As he saw the layout, Trevor and Blayne, alias Cartwright, were partners. Trevor, with the help of his unimpeachable county position, obtained the dope concerning the jewels of prominent society hostesses; his hirelings lifted the stuff at intervals, and it was then conveyed to Great Bardlow and secretly hidden in Trevor's innocent-looking wheat barges.

And then?

Then the stuff was expertly handled by Cartwright, the notorious diamond faker. Cartwright, who apparently lived for his roses. A lazy man, as retired civil servants are apt to be. Always in bed by eleven o'clock, and never up in the morning before ten.

"Oh, yeah?" murmured Norman, as he lounged behind the Packard's wheel. "Admitting that civil servants like their nine hours, nothing is going to make me believe that Comrade Blayne takes eleven! Somewhere in the vicinity of Bardlow Hall there is a secret workshop and Blayne is Head Man. I'll bet he never gets to bed before four o'clock in the morning and then indulges in a nap in the afternoon. Dawn Cottage is so innocent that Williams and his men could go through it with a tooth comb and find nothing incriminating."

He had a hunch all the same that Dawn Cottage was the key to the puzzle. The secret workshop was somewhere, and somewhere within a mile of Bardlow Hall. Not necessarily a large place. Just a small room would serve. A bench where Blayne could deal with the stuff as it came in—recutting the stones and melting down the settings. No doubt the stones, in their new guise, were disposed of through respectable channels in another part of the world.

His thoughts drifted to the late Sergeant Roper, and his cryptic letter to the Chief Commissioner of Police. Norman was certain in his own mind that Roper had twigged Blayne as an old lag; and Roper had conducted his secret investigations by the river. Perhaps there had been a mishap on the night when the boodle from the Launceston-Bevan job had come in and Roper had managed to get hold of that single earring. The exact truth would probably never be known, but this guess was good enough to satisfy Norman Conquest.

"That well in Blayne's scullery tickles my imagination," mused the Desperado. "As far as I could see, a perfectly good, if old-fashioned, well. Water at the bottom, and everything. Obviously a well which is in constant use, as the pump on the sink proves. There's Mrs. Rudd to consider too. At intervals she yanks out the rush mat and gives it a beating; she knows all about the well trap. Even if she opened the trap and looked into the well, she would see nothing that she didn't expect to see. But why, in that same scullery, a ladder with *used* hooks leading into an *unused* loft? A sweet, sweet thought, laddie, and one which needs bags of attention."

A quiver which went slithering up and down his spine told him that he was getting near to the heat. The music was getting distinctly louder. The very knowledge that he was going into action tonight had such a marked effect on him, wrought such a change in his appearance, that Mandeville Livingstone gazed at him open-eyed when he arrived at the little camp shortly before ten. A certain soft and

dreamy expression, which had been in evidence for some days, and which was quite foreign to his character—unkind people would call it a soppy look—had completely vanished.

"Gord love us!" ejaculated Mandeville Livingstone.

"I trust so, vassal," agreed Norman. "If *He* doesn't love us we're certainly in a nasty mess."

"You ain't the same, guv'nor," continued the little man, his whimsical, expressive face breaking into a crinkly grin. "What I mean is, you are the same! Blimey! Just like you was that first night when you came to my camp fire!"

A distinct jolt, but Norman took it well on the chin.

"Have I been so different since?"

"It ain't what you might call different, guv'nor—but you look sort of happy, and there's that don't-give-a-toss-for-any-body expression in your eyes," said Livingstone. "I'll bet you're all ready for your supper, ain't you, sir?"

"Place it before me, feudal servitor, and see what happens to it!" replied Norman gaily.

What Livingstone had seen was the old rake-hell fire of Norman Conquest's Cumberland ancestors. Those eyes of his were dancing with vivid life; his voice had regained its old lilt, and his very frame seemed more virile.

It is sad to reflect—not to put too fine a point on it, pitiful—that a woman, and a hell-cat at that, could effect such a change in a strong and determined young man. With Primrose Trevor out of Norman's mind for a spell, and the thought of coming strife taking her place, he was back at scratch. He was like one of those marvellous people in the advertisements who accomplish doughty deeds *the night before they happen!* And he hadn't had his Bourn-Vita, either.

"I've got a job for you, Brother Mandy," said Norman, as his little batman placed an appetizing hot supper before him. "You know the little cottage just down the road? The one with all the rose bushes in the front garden?"

"Why, yes, sir."

"Trot along and keep your eye on it—and be careful," said Norman. "Better climb the gate at the corner and walk in the meadow, parallel with the lane. It's a nice high hedge, and you won't be seen—or heard."

"You can trust me to move quiet if I have to, guv'nor," said the ex-tramp, with a sly wink. "There's many a rabbit I've took from under the keeper's eye—— Ahem! Meaning, sir, that you don't need to tell me twice."

"Fine! Just keep your eye on the cottage windows, and if the downstairs light goes out and a bedroom light comes on nip back and tell me."

"Is that all, guv'nor?"

"Just that."

Livingstone seemed a trifle disappointed, for the task was one which a child could have accomplished. But he went off without comment and Norman Conquest, whose appetite had returned to form, attacked the food vigorously. He had just finished, and was lighting a cigarette, when Mandeville returned.

"He's gone up to bed, sir—lights on in the bedroom now," reported the little man. "I wish you'd tell me what it's all about, guv'nor," he added wistfully. "I ain't so young as you are, maybe, nor yet so nippy, but I can be handy enough if it's a night job."

Norman gave his arm a warm grip.

"Thanks, pal, but it's a one-man job," he replied. "Later, perhaps, there may be a spot for you. All I want you to do right now is to follow the example of the people in the old song and put out the light and go to sleep."

"Not before I've washed and tidied up, sir."

"When I say right now, Brother Mandy, I mean right now," insisted Norman. "You'll lock yourself in and get into bed. I'm supposed to be in there with you. Get it?"

If, by chance, the opposition had any spies on the job, lurking in the woods, they would have been quite satisfied that Norman Conquest had gone to bed. He appeared in the doorway of the trailer-caravan for a few moments, and he inspected the sky, remarking that there was every indication of fine weather. Then he went in, closed the door, and shot the bolts vigorously. After a few minutes the main lights went out, and then the light of Livingstone's little compartment went out too. Shortly afterwards the door opened and a shadowy figure slid noiselessly out and merged into the night gloom. An eagle, if he had been handy, might have seen it; but spies of the opposition, never.

Norman was certainly his old self again! He was alert for every enemy move, and he was ready to be a jump ahead. A ghost, out for his nightly walk, could not have taught Norman anything. It is far more likely that he would have watched Norman with envy and picked up a few tips.

The light was still on in Matthew Blayne's bedroom when the wary Desperado arrived in sight of it. Norman had no definite plan in mind. He didn't believe in making plans. Plans are so apt to go wrong. The adventure might fizzle out in a frost, or it might lead to something highly explosive.

But one thing was certain. Norman Conquest could make no frontal attack on Sir Hastings Trevor until he had got the evidence. And he believed that the way to the evidence

was via Dawn Cottage. Blayne was the man who dealt with the hot jewels as they came in, and he naturally wouldn't attempt any of that dangerous and incriminating work in his own home. Neither was it likely that he would risk stealing forth from his cottage nightly. Norman was thinking of the well in the scullery. Admittedly, a melodramatic thought, but it was a nice one, all the same. He even toyed with the possibility of an underground tunnel and secret chambers, and one would have been justified in assuming that he had been dipping into the late Sergeant Roper's Edgar Wallace collection.

It was just ten forty-five when Blayne's bedroom light went out. Norman continued to watch. The place where the light had been was now black and shapeless; but Norman's eyes soon grew accustomed to the change, and he could just make out the shape of a casement window which was standing half open. He knew, from daylight observation, that all the lower windows of the cottage were unnecessarily strong and provided with heavy bolts and even burglar alarms. That open bedroom window looked very, very innocent.

Beneath it, the wall of the cottage was bare except for an American Pillar rambler. The bright printed curtains were lazily rustling in the breeze.

Norman waited until the clock of Great Bardlow Church solemnly boomed out eleven mellow strokes. Then he made a move. He was in no hurry. It was eleven-ten by the time he reached the little gravel path immediately beneath Blayne's window. He took from his pocket a dull metal tubular object, about eight inches long, which looked rather like a grease gun. But when he touched a hidden catch, the thing telescoped upwards until it was many feet in length. There was a strong metal hook at the top, and the surface of the telescopic tube was coarsely ribbed so that a good hand grip was assured.

A useful contrivance for such a job as this. Norman secured the hook firmly in the bedroom window sill and gradually allowed all his weight to bear. The hook held. Hand-over-hand, with the graceful ease of a trained acrobat, he mounted until he was able to grip the window sill with his hands. Another minute, and he was sitting on the sill itself.

He made no attempt to touch the window, for he had a strong suspicion that if he did so a secret alarm would be set in operation. There was just sufficient room for him to squeeze through the gap; and if he had been a trained acrobat during his climb, he now had to be a contortionist.

Any chance marauder, tempted by the open window, would certainly have opened it farther. Norman didn't, which was just the difference. He rather admired that open window. A clever touch. It looked so very natural.

So certain was he that his guess was right, that he hardly troubled to look at Blayne's bed, which was vaguely visible in the faint starlight from the window. He crept near. The bed was turned back and slightly disturbed, and Blayne's pyjamas were lying handy. But there was no Blayne.

"So now we know!" murmured Norman contentedly.

His descent of the staircase was another lesson to the ghosts. When he reached the scullery, which he did without once using his electric torch, he was not in the least surprised to find that the rush mat was out of position. Ditto the ladder. In fact, the ladder was nowhere to be seen.

Norman gave himself one guess. He cautiously lifted the well trap and listened. Not a sound. He took a copper from his pocket and dropped it. A slight pause, and then a little musical splash. Bending lower, Norman slipped the guard cap over the lens of his electric torch—a cap which allowed only a tiny pencil of light to escape—and pressed the switch.

The ladder was fixed to one side of the well, its hooks in metal slots concealed by an overhanging baulk of wood.

With a gay little chirrup, Norman descended. The ladder reached only a third of the way down the well, and after he had descended a few rungs, he slipped the guard cap aside so that the full light blazed out. As long as he kept the beam pointed downwards there was no danger of the light showing above.

At first he was puzzled. The walls of the well were obviously of great age, being composed of square blocks of stone. Having reached the bottom of the ladder he found that there was nothing else to be done. There was no opening, as he had half expected. But after a further examination he saw that, while the middle and lower rungs of the ladder were well worn, the bottom rung of all showed no wear at all.

It was a helpful clue. He stood on the rung next to the bottom and concentrated the light of his torch on the opposite wall. Within direct reach of his hand there was one stone which looked just a little different from its fellows. A trifle more smooth and inclined to be slightly polished. He pressed on it tentatively—and a square slab of the well wall rolled noiselessly back, revealing a mysterious black cavity.

Norman grinned. This was easier than he had expected. It was hardly likely that the opening of the secret door had

set off any warning device. This door was used by Blayne every night. All the same——

He found himself in a short concrete tunnel. The concrete was comparatively new—certainly less than ten years old. It was so low that he had to crouch double; but after a matter of fifteen feet he found himself in another tunnel which ran at right angles.

And this tunnel was of the genuine vintage. It was six feet in height, with an arched roof of solid stone blocks; it was between four and five feet wide and built of the same material as the roof. Age-old stones, the mortar having long since disappeared from the facing. Here and there a stone block crumbling. Here and there a block missing altogether.

Norman chortled with sheer glee.

"Early sixteenth century and constructed in the days when traitors to the king—or parliament, as the case might be—had to provide themselves with quick methods of making a secret getaway," he murmured. "Plotters in council on a dark and dirty night, snugly quaffing their sack under the rafters of Bardlow Hall. Then the sound of many horsemen and jingling spurs. A swift dive for the secret panels, and by the time the enemy gets in and searches the baronial hall the plotters are umpteen miles away, quaffing more sack in their various homes."

He flashed his light up and down the tunnel. To the right there was a great mass of mouldering stone and rubbish where the tunnel had collapsed. But to the left, a tunnel which had been restored in many spots. He advanced along it cautiously, and he knew that he was going in the general direction of Bardlow Hall.

His spirits were at their highest. Although he had toyed with the thought of an underground tunnel, he had never really believed that he would find one. This was just as good as Edgar Wallace. And, after all, why not? Underground tunnels were made long before book critics were thought of, and they were mostly used by desperate men engaged in desperate enterprises. Sir Hastings Trevor would have been nothing but a fool if he had not taken advantage of the natural resources of his property.

The tunnel took a turn to the left and it was no longer level. It dipped slightly and at the bottom of the dip, as Norman's torchlight showed, there was a very modern-looking door set right across it. He switched off his light and crept on in total darkness. When he reached the door the guard cap of his torch was in position again, and he flicked the light pencil on to the woodwork. Unpainted teak; a

modern brass handle. Norman softly grasped the handle and turned it.

The door silently opened.

He was not dazzled by the glow of electric light that came from within, for it was soft and his eyes were accustomed to the white beam of his own torch. A gentle, rhythmic whirring caught his ear. He pushed the door open a little wider and, as he stepped inside, the supple fingers of his right hand fondled a fistful of sudden death.

One swift, lightning glance enabled him to take in the whole scene. A comparatively small chamber of modern concrete, with another teak door immediately opposite. On Norman's right, a built-in bench, running right across the chamber, with shaded electric lights overhead. An electric radiator fitted flush into the wall, sending forth a glow which robbed the underground chamber of its natural damp coldness.

Seated at the bench, on a comfortable chair, was Norman's old friend, the rose man. He was working at a machine which resembled a miniature lathe; on the bench near him, resting on soft velvet, were a number of sparkling diamonds and rubies. At the other end of the bench there was a little furnace, with crucibles and moulds.

Norman contemplated the scene happily. The secret workshop of the organization which had baffled Scotland Yard for more than six years! As a workshop it was small, insignificant; just a modest concrete chamber a few fathoms under the meadows of Great Bardlow, with a man who loved his roses seated at the work bench!

Trevor had built this chamber, of course. A comparatively easy job, for the tunnel was already in existence. The door on the other side evidently led into a continuation of the tunnel. Norman Conquest determined to find out, and there was no time like the present.

He strolled forward with leisurely ease, until he was right against the bench.

"And how, Comrade Cartwright, are all the little diamonds this evening?" inquired Norman politely.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE OLD AGE PENSION

THE MAN who was known in Great Bardlow as Matthew Blayne gave such a violent start that the large diamond he was holding jerked out of his sensitive fingers and went

rolling across the floor. In one move he brushed back his eye-shade and started to his feet.

"Good God!" he croaked aghast.

"Roses are interesting things, Joburg, palsy-walsy, but give me diamonds every time," continued Norman Conquest conversationally. "Nice little spot you have here. Quite cosy. Don't they provide you with any assistants? You must get lonely down here all by yourself——"

"Don't shoot. Conquest—don't shoot!" squealed the terrified man, his eyes fixed in a fascinated stare on Norman's fistful of cold steel. "I knew you were on to me! If you want these diamonds, take them!"

"My poor sap, you surely don't think I'm interested in diamonds?" drawled Norman Conquest, as he leaned negligently against the bench. "I only came down here——"

He broke off. Blayne's right hand was sliding forward towards a bell push at the side of the bench, and his finger nearly touched it. With one swift wrench, Norman jerked the man completely round.

"Naughty, naughty!" he admonished.

Crash!

The bunched knuckles of his left hand slogged into Blayne's jaw, and the man folded up like an accordion. Norman was not sorry that he had brought the interview to a close. A desperate man is likely to do foolish things. There might be several methods by which Blayne could attract reinforcements. And Norman had a fancy for conducting his tour of exploration unhampered.

Having satisfied himself that Blayne was not likely to recover for some time, Norman went through the man's pockets. A bunch of keys interested him and he transferred them to his own person. Blayne was wearing a close-fitting overall above his ordinary suit and, as the keys had been in the overall pocket, Norman had every reason to suppose that they were used only in this underground haunt.

He quickly tied Blayne's hands behind his back, secured his ankles, and fastened an effective gag. Then he bundled the man underneath the bench and stood upright. His eye made a swift survey of the articles on the bench. The full regalia of an expert jewel mechanic. Blayne might be the rose man to Great Bardlow, but he was still "Joburg" Cartwright down here.

Norman felt rather pleased with himself. Everything was going well. A flickering thought, filtering in and out of his mind, suggested that everything was going rather too well. This wasn't merely easy. It was pie. In imagination he had pictured a much bigger workshop than this, with five

or six hardened crooks on the job.

Reflection, however, satisfied the Desperado that the actuality was far more probable than the imagined scene. The more men who worked on the "inside," the smaller the split. This game was evidently a two-man enterprise. The fellows who did the actual snatching, and who undertook ninety per cent of the risk, probably received the usual miserable percentage which the high-placed fence is generous enough to allow.

It was Trevor who conducted the executive end of the racket, and Blayne who did all the skilled work. He had plenty of time. Working three or four hours a night, while pretending to be a man of retired leisure, he could accomplish much. If several big snatches were made in the course of a month, it was likely that a long period would elapse before the next. Perhaps half a year would go by while the organization allowed Scotland Yard to flounder. And Blayne carried on all the time, steadily, industriously.

There was no hurry. The stones he recut today would not be disposed of, in all probability, until next year—or even the year after.

"Well, folks, I raise my hat to you," murmured Norman admiringly. "As pretty a little set-up as I ever saw, and I just hate to bust it to ribbons. If you had behaved yourselves decently, I would have let you carry on unhindered. But blokes who tie me in sacks and drop me in rivers—blokes who try to crush my head under a ton-weight—have got to be taught their manners. I never did fancy cold-blooded murder anyway. Roper was an unpleasant blighter, but he was a damned clever police officer—and he was bludgeoned from the back without the slightest chance of fighting for his life. Sangley did that, and Sangley was told to do it by Trevor."

The Desperado's eyes hardened until they were like frosted chrome-steel. He was a born fighter, and the killing of men in the heat of battle did not clash with his code. But when men died as Sergeant Roper had died, his instincts gave him peremptory orders to punish the killers.

Thinking of Sangley, Norman found it necessary to revise his original theory. He believed, now, that the game had originally been a three-man racket. It was quite likely—indeed, certain—that Sangley had been Blayne's assistant and had worked with him nightly. It occurred to the Desperado that perhaps Trevor and Blayne had not been sorry to get rid of Sangley so easily. He may have been causing trouble and, anyway, a two-way split is always better than a three-way split.

For the first time, Norman noticed an extraordinarily narrow opening, doorless, in a corner of the chamber. He thought it was a recess—until he flashed his torch into it. Then he saw that it was a concrete tunnel scarcely more than eighteen inches wide. Getting his sense of direction from the general line of the original old tunnel, he realized that this modern passage led in the direction of the abandoned water mill.

"Might as well take a look," he decided.

He had little fear that there would be any interruption. The narrow concrete tunnel led as straight as a die for a considerable distance. The ventilation was bad, and in places the concrete was beginning to crack. He reached the end presently and found another teak door barring the way. One of Blayne's keys fitted the patent lock. And Norman found himself in a small concrete chamber no bigger than a cupboard. There appeared to be no ventilation at all and the air was foul. Obviously, the place was only used occasionally, and for very brief periods. Electric light was laid on and Norman pressed a switch. On the wall opposite the door there was something which looked like a small steel safe. Blayne's keys again did service.

The "safe" was a replica of the hermetically sealed cupboard which Norman Conquest had seen on one of Trevor's barges. There was another door on the farther side, sealed shut. A steel cable was coiled inside the cupboard, and Norman had no doubt that there was some ingenious mechanical method by which this cable could be attached to a barge as it lay in the lock.

It all seemed very involved and complicated—but the safety of it! Scotland Yard men could seize a suspected barge as it lay in the river, and loot from a big robbery could be transferred ashore under the very eyes of the officers! And search as they would, they could find nothing.

Norman closed the steel door, switched off the light, and went back. The central chamber was just as he had left it, except for a muffled groaning sound beneath the bench. Blayne was coming round. Norman took a look at him, and there was such terror in the man's eyes that he forebore to put him to sleep again.

"There's no need to look at me like that, brother," said Norman gruffly. "I had to slog you, but I don't hit helpless men. Just lie quiet and I'll soon treat you to a nice little ride to London. I want to introduce you to a pal of mine. Bloke named Williams. You'll like him."

He chuckled as he went across to the other door. As he had expected, it led into a continuation of the age-old tunnel.

As he walked swiftly along, knowing that his steps were taking him towards Bardlow Hall, he made a few readjustments of the general scheme. As events had turned out, he would place that promised dish before Inspector Williams this very night—but the dish would contain only Cartwright.

Norman wanted to amuse himself by observing the reactions of Sir Hastings Trevor—when the latter discovered that his invaluable mechanic was missing. There was likely to be a good deal of fun. Norman pictured himself playing games for quite a few days. This underground tunnel was great stuff. A pity to waste it.

Musing thus, he came to another of the heavy teak doors. But he did not attempt to open it. Beyond, he guessed, there was a stairway leading up into Bardlow Hall—probably into the library. Plenty of time to make certain later. At present he was attracted by the solid steel door of a strong room which was let into the concrete wall on his left. He had a feeling that he was in the vault of a bank.

"I knew one of these keys was the key of a safe!" he chuckled, as he selected one of the bunch with unerring accuracy. "This is getting laughably easy."

Prophetic words!

He fitted the key into the lock of the great steel door, turned it, and swung the heavy handle. The door came open with solid sluggishness and Norman's torchlight flashed into the interior. If he had needed any proof that Blayne and Trevor were co-partners of equal standing, he had it now. Blayne would never have possessed the key of this safe if he had not been an equal partner.

For it was the Trevor-Blayne private bank.

"I always believe," murmured Norman Conquest, as he made swift examinations, "in providing myself with an ample old age pension. This is a sight that does my heart as much good as a massage."

The safe contained great bundles of American currency—dollar bills to the value of anything between one hundred and a hundred and fifty thousand pounds. French francs—Italian lira—German marks! Solid cash! Money that could be used in almost any country—money that could never be traced.

All very nice—all very pretty. But when Norman Conquest had swung open the heavy door of the strong room, warning lights had commenced glowing, and warning signals had started clicking simultaneously in three rooms of Bardlow Hall—the library, Primrose Trevor's bedroom, and her father's bedroom!

So even Matthew Blayne could not open the safe without

the knowledge of his partners. Who was the humorous gentleman who once made the crack that there is no honour among thieves?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

TO SAVE HER MAN

MANDEVILLE LIVINGSTONE, his weather-wrinkled face set in a blank mask, regarded his unexpected visitor with stony disapproval.

"It's all very well, miss, to come knocking me up in the middle of the night, but Mr. Conquest ain't here," he said woodenly. "It's no good a king me where he is, neither——"

"I've got to know where he is," said Joy Everard.

She was standing at the door of the trailer-caravan, and Livingstone, who was in his pyjamas, was invisible except for his face. The dark-eyed, slim little girl, having had a long and stern fight with the remnants of her pride, had at last done the thing she knew she should have done twenty-four hours ago. She had come to warn her man.

And the fathead wasn't at home!

Joy knew what that meant; he was on the warpath, and the trail might lead him into Primrose Trevor's arms. He might just as well have walked into the coils of a boa constrictor.

It was no time for half measures, and Joy was a determined little person. She gave the door one heavy push and was inside.

"Here, you can't do this, miss!" gasped Livingstone in consternation. "I ain't dressed!"

Joy closed the door and put her back to it. She increased her host's embarrassment by feeling for the electric light switch and turning it. Mandeville, in his pyjamas, was an interesting sight. He did not appear to think so, for he shrank back behind the table.

"Where's Mr. Conquest?" demanded Joy fiercely.

"Really, miss, I——"

"Don't you understand that I'm his friend?" she went on, gripping the little man's arm in a tight hold. "He's in danger. He thinks he's in love with Primrose Trevor, and she's a devil straight out of hell!"

The light in Joy's eyes so fascinated Livingstone that he completely forgot his *deshabille*. It reminded him of some great and holy fire; a light of sheer purity, mingled with such anxiety and pain, that the little man softened. And

that reference to Primrose Trevor had rung the bell with a clang. He had never been able to see eye to eye with Norman about Primrose.

He regarded his visitor with new interest. She was hatless, and she was wearing a plain black dress and indoor shoes. Her sweet little elfin face was flushed and her eyes were aflame. Suddenly, he recognized her. He had seen her photograph—a smiling, happy photograph—among Norman's effects. She looked so different now that he was shocked. But he remembered the words on the photograph—"From one pal to another, Pixie." At odd times Norman Conquest had regaled Mandeville with stirring stories of his exploits against certain septic individuals named Mortimer and Glibley and Voegler; and in all these stories a staunch little girl named Pixie had figured. Here she was in the flesh, and the little ex-tramp knew exactly why Norman's eyes had sparkled when he had spoken of her.

"Listen, friend!" said Joy earnestly. "For weeks past I've been calling your fatheaded boss a fool. I've been green with jealousy—and I'm the fool. Get it?" She gripped him harder. "I'm the fool for not coming straight to him and telling him just where he gets off. For twenty-four hours I've known that Primrose Trevor plotted to murder him; she lured him into a trap, and then stood by while her killers went to work. But I was watching—and I saved him."

"But—but he thought——"

"I know!" said Joy bitterly. "He thought Primrose had fished him out of the soup. Very neat! It just suited her plans to make him think so. If I had had the sense of a frog, I would have come straight here this morning, instead of sending Norman fool notes in half-pounds of butter——"

"Butter!" almost yelped Mandeville. "Gord love us! You're the girl I was talking to in the medder! You've had me puzzled all day, miss! This morning, you was a housemaid in a print frock, with cap and apron, and I knew your face seemed a bit familiar-like. But I never connected you with the photograph I've seen. Well, I ain't really seen it. I only gave it a kind of casual look. . . . Now, tonight, you're different again!"

"I got the job at Bardlow Hall because I thought Norman was just having fun with a simple country girl," said Joy, her firm little chin stiffening. "Then I found things out—I was going to warn him, and I saw him take Primrose into his arms and kiss her—and my pride turned another double somersault, and I decided to let him stew in his own juice. Tonight they found out who I was, and I had to make a swift

getaway. It was so swift that I couldn't stay to change my clothes, or even get any money. I dived through the first window I could see and ran. When you've got Death at your heels, you don't wait to put on a walking frock."

She breathed hard. After her escape from Bardlow Hall—and she had been wise in losing no time—she had discarded her neat cap and apron and had become a part of the darkness. She had fought a little battle with herself. Norman was quite near at hand, and she could easily have gone to him. But she hadn't. Instead, she had started walking to Clacton-on-Sea!

The truth was. Joy was hurt—deeply, grievously hurt. But she was big enough to sink her own feelings. She knew that Norman Conquest was in danger, and her love for him had given her hurt pride the K.O. in that fight she had had with herself.

"I don't rightly know where he is, miss," said Livingstone, now thoroughly won over. "All I know is that he asked me to keep an eye on the little cottage with the roses just down the lane. Seems like he went there himself. He wouldn't tell me to watch the place, so's he should know when the lights went out, unless he meant to do something, would he?"

"That's all I want to know," said Joy, switching off the light.

"Here, wait a minute, miss," protested the ex-tramp. "You ain't going there alone! You ain't going without me! Just wait until I get some togs on——"

"While I'm waiting for you, he may be walking into a death trap," interrupted Joy, as she opened the door. "Now that these people have found out who I am they'll believe that I came to warn Norman at once. And if Primrose meets him, she won't attempt to fool him any more. She'll kill him!"

Joy slipped out into the night and hurried away. But Mandeville Livingstone was not the kind of man to be deterred by lack of clothes. He hastily slipped his shoes on, grabbed a mackintosh, and hurried after her—but not until he had dived his hand into a locker and possessed himself of one of Norman Conquest's beautiful automatics. He didn't know how to use it, but the feel of it gave him confidence.

Joy was glad that the little man had come. When they reached Dawn Cottage they soon found that the only possible entry was by way of the half-open bedroom window. Joy climbed nimbly onto Livingstone's back and told him to mount to the window sill of the lower room. She didn't know whose cottage this was, but she suspected that Norman was inside

—and she was going in too.

Once Livingstone had reached his perch, Joy climbed onto his shoulders and told him to hold his head rigid. With one foot on his head she reached up and grasped the bedroom window sill. Fifteen seconds later she was inside.

"Better take this, miss," panted Livingstone.

"A gun? I don't want——"

"It's a little pocket torch, miss."

He tossed it up and she caught it deftly. With a soft breath of thanks she turned into the room. One flash of the torch revealed the empty bed. It took Joy just a further twenty seconds to discover the open well trap in the scullery.

Her heart was now beating with painful excitement. An empty cottage with a strange well—and a ladder leading down into the depths! Norman had known exactly what he was doing!

With a sure tread, she descended the ladder. The door into the tunnel was open. She reached the main tunnel and ran along it like a hare. In the workshop she found Blayne groaning under the bench—ample evidence that the Desperado had been doing his stuff. The farther door was wide open. A continuation of the tunnel! She ran on. Her anxiety for Norman was far too acute to permit her to be astonished by the strangeness of this subterranean labyrinth.

She saw him at last—saw him as he was examining the contents of the big strong room. She ran up so lightly that he heard nothing until she was practically upon him.

"Reach, Desperado!" she whispered coolly.

He spun round, hand leaping for iron. An instinctive move, for he had instantly recognized her voice.

"Pixie!"

"You need lots of help, Desperado," said Joy steadily.

"How the dickens—— That dress!" ejaculated Norman, staring at her in amazement. "I've never seen you wearing a dress like that before, young Everard! Didn't I tell you to stay in Clacton? What's the big idea——"

"I sent you a note this morning—in the butter," interrupted Joy quickly. "Oh, it was a silly thing to do, I know. I should have come to you——"

"You're Mary Stevens!" almost yelled Norman, light flooding into his mind like a magnesium flare. "That dress you're wearing is a maid's dress! I get it now!"

"I wonder if you do," said the girl, running up to him, and gripping both his arms and looking up into his surprised face. "They found out about me tonight, Desperado. I had to come and warn you. They tried to trap me, but I was too quick——"

"They?"

"Trevor and his daughter."

"Trevor and his—*what?*" The words rattled like machine gun fire, and the sudden change in Norman Conquest's expression was not pleasant to see. "Listen, Pixie! That butter message of yours was foolish enough. Foolish and childish. I never thought you were capable of such idiotic jealousy. I'm helping Primrose because she's in a spot."

She looked at him in strange wonder—in pain.

"See all this money?" he went on, before she could speak. "I'm taking it—and half of it is for Primrose! She's tried to get away from this hell, but she's never had the money. I'm going to whisk her to the other side of the world where she'll be safe."

"Are you so blind, Norman?" whispered Joy. "This money is as much hers as her father's. She's not the angel you believe her to be. She's the real ringleader of the organization! She tried to kill you last night——"

"Pixie, you're stark, raving mad!" interrupted Norman gruffly. "She saved my life last night! Her father's hirelings had grabbed me, and she risked her own life to cut me free. The girl is as pure as snow! And you'd better not say anything more, because I don't want to hear it!"

The wonder in her eyes increased to dazed stupefaction. It was she who had saved his life—and he didn't know it! He was so infatuated, so blinded, that he had been unable to recognize her touch. What a fool she had been not to tell him at the time! It would have been so easy—just one soft whisper.

"You've got to believe me, Norman," said Joy tensely. "The girl is a snake—her very touch is poison. She's poisoned you against me, but that doesn't matter. The next time you meet her she'll kill you. She knows who I am, and she'll think that you've got enough sense to believe my warning——"

"Stop!" Norman's voice was hard and cruel. "I told you I didn't want to hear any more and I meant it!" He looked at her with anger blazing in his eyes. "You'd better go, Pixie, or I might say something I shall be sorry for. I thought you were a pal—I thought you knew me well enough to trust me. But when it comes to a test, you're just like any other girl. You're blind—you're jealous. You tear another girl's reputation to shreds without compunction."

Joy's own temper, held in check for so long, blazed out like volcanic fire.

"You great big fool!" she burst out. "Even when I warn you, you refuse to listen! I might have known!" She stood

back and and eyed him up and down contemptuously. "The great Norman Conquest! What is he, after all, but a hunk of cheese? 1066—the Terror of Evil-doers! Baloney! Once, I thought you were a grand person, but I find you're nothing but an inflated bag of wind. The first she-cat who comes along purrs at you, and you lose ninety per cent of the wits God gave you and nose dive to hell!" She swung round so that he would not see the tears that had suddenly welled into her eyes. "All right! I've told you what I think, and I'm through!"

She spoke those last words as steadily and fiercely as the others, and he never guessed how great an effort she had had to make, for her throat felt paralyzed and her heart was choking her.

"Wait a minute!" His voice was like roughened steel, and the hand which reached out and grasped her shoulder was brutal. "You can't say things like that, Pixie, and get away with it! And as far as I'm concerned, I never want to see you again in the whole of my life—but before you go, you're going to apologize for what you've said about Primrose Trevor!"

"Apologize!" She spun round, and he saw the tears streaming down her face; he saw the burning agony behind the indignation in her eyes. "I'd rather apologize to a louse!" She wrenched at her shoulder. "Let me go——"

"Not until——"

"Good God, Primrose, haven't you heard enough?" came a sudden, shrill voice. "Must we stand here, listening to more of this blastiferous drivel? Put your hands up, Conquest, and keep reaching!"

Norman and Joy sprang apart. A little cry of hopeless despair escaped the girl, and Norman spun round. He saw Sir Hastings Trevor, gun in hand. Beside him, Primrose . . . Primrose in a ravishing frock . . .

Norman Conquest reeled. He saw Primrose with a gun in her own hand—with an expression of hard, devilish triumph on her face that peeled the scales off his eyes in a twinkling. If somebody had crashed him over the head with a pickaxe handle, he could not have looked more stunned. For in that single instant he was disillusioned; he knew that Joy's warning had been justified.

"Keep reaching, Conquest!" said the fair, blue-eyed girl. "Do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to give myself the pleasure of killing you. Now—this minute!"

That lovely face, already distorted, became so utterly fiendish that Norman's brain was momentarily paralyzed. All he could do was to stand with his hands upraised, staring—

staring. He could not readjust his focus quickly enough. The scene, crashing on him with the suddenness of a thunderclap, was like a hideous nightmare.

"Very obliging of you to both come into this tunnel," continued Primrose coolly. "I can shoot you so easily and nobody will hear. It doesn't matter how much blood flows on the floor—or splashes on the walls. If you know any prayers, say them! You've got just ten seconds."

There was such venom in her voice that there could be no doubt that she was in deadly earnest. Her trigger finger stiffened and her eyes blazed with hell's fire. Flame and lead spurted from the gun muzzle—and in that same fractional second Joy Everard leaped in front of her man. She staggered against him as the bullet thudded into her breast, and she fell to the floor in a little sighing heap.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE RETURN OF 1066

THE REACTION on Norman Conquest was terrible to see. One glance downwards showed him his faithful little Pixie's quivering form; showed him the red lifeblood streaming onto the cold stone floor of the tunnel. In a fraction of time, so infinitesimal that it was like a passing breath, he realized a great many things.

No longer was he stunned. His brain was as clear as mountain air. Pixie had been right! Pixie had warned him and he had brutally rebuffed her! More, his hot temper had been the direct cause of this ghastly tragedy. If he had listened to her, instead of quarrelling, he would never have relaxed his vigilance, and Trevor and his daughter would not have had the drop on him. So blind had he been, so dumb, that they must have listened to a considerable part of the conversation. And he had not even seen them! Fool, crass, blundering numskull!

Now it was too late. At his feet lay his best and truest pal, her lifeblood wasting away. And his was the fault! In one shattering blow the truth hit him and he went berserk. Young Pixie had sacrificed herself for him—and he was her murderer as surely as though he had pulled the fatal trigger with his own finger.

He took one step towards Primrose and the girl recoiled. Although she was armed and his hands were empty, she lost that iron nerve of hers. Never had she seen such an expression on the face of a man as she saw on Norman

Conquest's. He was Nemesis in human form.

"Back, you madman!" cried Primrose sharply.

He took another step and the awful look on his face was intensified. He did not seem to see her gun. His hands were outstretched, his fingers crooked. He was reaching for her—reaching for that soft, fair throat.

Bang!

She managed to pull the trigger, and for a split second Norman paused, his left shoulder, jerking back as though somebody had punched him. The bullet had torn into flesh, but it did not check him. His fury knew no pain and the gun in Primrose's hand might have been a peashooter. She screamed suddenly, her nerve shattered by that dreadful death-defying advance. She pulled the trigger again—pulled it jerkily, wildly. The bullet hummed past his ear, flicking a fragment of skin, deafening him with its angry whine. And still he advanced; his fingers were almost at her throat.

"Run, Primrose—run!" came a half-choking scream from Sir Hastings. "Stand still, Conquest!"

Norman had forgotten Trevor. Trembling with fright, the man had managed to sidestep, and now he was jamming the muzzle of his gun into Norman's back.

"Fire, you fool!" panted Primrose, jerking madly at the trigger of her own automatic. "This cursed thing has jammed! Kill him!"

Jammed! Jammed because of her jittery finger—jammed because she had momentarily lost her nerve.

"If anybody fires, I shall be compelled to do some shooting too," said Mandeville Livingstone apologetically.

The voice was so unexpected that Sir Hastings Trevor gave a jump. He looked over his shoulder. The little man, as cool as ice, a grotesque figure in his wrinkled pyjama trousers and mackintosh, was waving his gun muzzle about suggestively. He hadn't even released the safety catch of that gun, and his heart was turning handsprings. But he looked dangerous.

Norman Conquest took instant advantage of the momentary diversion. His berserk mood had passed; he was his own cool, quick-witted self. He had heard a faint little sigh from his pal on the floor—and he knew that she was not dead.

Crash!

His fist came round in a half-circle—a short, deadly half-arm jab. Trevor took it on the chin and he toppled against the wall of the tunnel with a fractured jaw, and he sagged like a bundle of old rags to the ground. In the nick of time Norman checked his fist as it was on its way to mete

out similar punishment to Primrose. He had never hit a woman in his life, and some latent instinct held his hand now. He seized her wrist and wrenched the gun away from her.

"Leave her to me, guv'nor," said Mandeville eagerly. "See what you can do for the poor little gal! If this she-devil moves as much as a finger, I'll send her home to hell full of lead!"

Norman was not listening. Since Joy had fallen, he had hardly given a thought to his enemies. His one desire, at first, had been to throttle Primrose with his own bare hands; but after he had heard that little sigh from Joy he had forgotten everything else.

She was bleeding—bleeding pitifully. But she was still alive. On her face there was an expression of sweet, calm happiness. And the hardened young buccancer choked, and Pixie's lovely face swam in a watery film. Even as a child, Norman Conquest had been a hard nut and he had seldom cried. But his eyes, at this minute, were blinded with tears.

Gently, tenderly, he lifted the slight, limp form. His lips caressed hers for a mere second. Through a mist he saw the open doorway at the end of the tunnel—and electrically lighted stairs leading upwards.

He came out in the library of Bardlow Hall. He walked straight out through the front door, intending to find his way to the garage. But outside, on the drive, stood Sir Hastings' big saloon.

Norman Conquest was torn by dreadful indecision. Should he seek to aid Joy here, on the spot, or rush her straight to the Cottage Hospital in Studbury? She was bleeding terribly, and she might be dead by the time he arrived. Yet, if he kept her here, there would be delay—long, agonizing, horrible delay, while doctors were fetched.

With set teeth he placed her gently in the back of the car, wrapped a rug over her, and sprang into the driver's seat. His shoulder was throbbing as though hot irons were boring into it, and every movement he made was exquisite agony. But he was totally unaware of this. His thoughts were all for his little lady.

He drove into Studbury. He carried Joy into the Cottage Hospital. He was a gaunt, fantastic figure, with blood shining wetly on his hands. The night sister and nurse cried out in horror as they saw him.

"The doctor—quick," he muttered. "Bullet wound—don't know where, but it's mighty near the heart. For God's sake, save her life."

They took her away from him, and they thought that the

blood on his hands was her blood. Some of it, indeed, was. He wandered out into the night, knowing that they could tell him nothing yet. And on the steps of the little hospital he came face to face with a burly, apple-cheeked man whom he did not even recognize. The light over the doorway was quite good, but Norman would have passed Inspector Williams without a word.

"Good heavens, Conquest, I thought it was you!" ejaculated the inspector, seizing him by the arm. "I saw you drive past a few minutes ago. . . . I came down, after all, although I wasn't going to mess things up by coming to Bardlow."

Norman looked at him strangely.

"Hallo, Bill!" he muttered, standing there, with blood dripping steadily from his left hand onto the steps.

"God! You're wounded, man!" shouted the inspector. "What in hell's name has happened?"

"Wounded?" said Norman Conquest, in wonder. "Am I? Better get to Bardlow Hall, brother. "You'll find an open panel in the library—leads to tunnel. Livingstone down there and he needs your help. I'm staying here. Young Pixie. . . ."

He turned, panic suddenly seizing him, and he ran into the hospital. Inspector Williams, his face hard and set, shrewdly guessed the rest. He ran back to the police station—to collect Inspector Marshall and his men.

In the hospital lobby, the night sister met the Desperado. The entire staff of the little establishment was on its toes. The night sister saw the blood dripping from Norman's hand.

"Is she—still alive?" he whispered, and he had had to take his courage in both hands to ask the question.

"She's in the operating theatre, with Dr. Burns," replied the sister gently. "I think there might be a chance." She took him by the arm. "I can see we're going to have two operations on our hands tonight."

She led him away.

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In the course of his adventurous career, Norman Conquest had spent many dreadful and agonizing nights; nights in the desert sand tortured and half dying of thirst; nights in the jungle, with hostile savages on every hand; nights on the battlefields of China, with Death stalking with every shadow.

But never had he spent such a soul-torturing night as this tranquil summer's night in the little Suffolk town of Studbury. His wound was dressed and it was not serious. He knew nothing whatever about it. They told him that they

had extracted a bullet from Joy's body, and she was in the hands of God. Her injury was serious—deadly serious. The bullet had taken an upward course, lodging near her shoulder blade. If, by some freak chance, it had sped downward, her heart would have been pierced and she would have been dead on the instant.

It was getting on for seven o'clock, and the sun was shining with glorious early-morning freshness, when Dr. Burns went across to where Norman was sitting and looked into his face. Not a word was necessary. On the kindly little elderly doctor's face there was a half-smile. He took Norman by his good arm and led him into a private ward.

It was just as well that Norman did not try to speak; for he could not have uttered a word. He found himself sitting beside a white little cot; and on the pillow lay a sweet head. Joy's eyes were open, and on her pinched, drawn face there was a look which eased all his pain.

"Hallo, Desperado!" she whispered. "The doctor tells me that everything's going to be all right."

"God! What a fool I've been!" said Norman huskily. "I can't say the things I want to say, young Pixie. You ought to curse me instead of smiling like that! I don't deserve your forgiveness. . . ."

She drew his head down and kissed him, and she read in his eyes such tenderness and remorse that from that second onwards her recovery was a foregone conclusion.

Later, Norman Conquest walked out of the hospital on cushions of air. His step was so springy, his eye was so bright, that when he met Inspector Williams the latter needed to ask no questions.

"Damn it, Conquest, I'm glad!" said the Scotland Yard man. "She's aces!"

"Don't be a cockeyed chump!" snapped Norman. "What do you mean—aces? She's the grandest little person who ever drew breath! I'm not fit to lick her shoes——"

"Well, that, of course, is a debatable point," admitted Mr. Williams dryly. "I thought you'd like to know that we've nabbed Trevor and the girl and Cartwright. Perhaps you didn't know that Dawes was in the hospital here? I understand that your little pal, Joy, presented him with a nasty packet during the evening. Between the two of you, you seem to have been having one hell of a picnic."

"She's going to get well, Bill," said Norman dreamily.

"And evidence!" continued Mr. Williams. "Boy, have we got evidence! Jewels from a dozen known robberies—although, curiously enough, we've found none of the Supreme or Dalecourt stuff. Perhaps it'll turn up later. We found

a book with the names of all the lesser crooks—the hired—who have been attending to the snatch end of the . . . They're all being rounded up this minute."

Norman jerked himself back to realities; he had heard some of the inspector's words through a kind of fog.

"I can help you with the Supreme and Dalecourt stuff Sweet William," he said. "I've got it in my safe at the Arches. Never meant to stick to it—not interested in that kind of boodle." He turned on the inspector with annoyance. "Why the hell are you bothering me with all this silly chatter?"

Mr. Williams understood and left him alone. Norman smiled a rather twisted smile. It was rather funny that Williams had not mentioned all that solid cash in the opposition's strong room. Not that it mattered anyway.

Joy was alive—Joy was going to get well! What did anything matter beyond that?

Later, of course, Norman came down to earth. It was going to be a long wait before Joy could come out of the hospital. And towards the afternoon of that first day, Norman went back to his camp and told Mandeville Livingstone that they were going to shift to the outskirts of Studbury.

"Yes, gov'nor," said the little man. "If you'll excuse me, I wonder if I am right? There's something inside the caravan, gov'nor."

Norman went into the caravan. The table was piled with bundles of dollar currency—£100,000's worth of it! Mandeville hadn't bothered about "that foreign stuff," as he called it. The Gay Desperado took one look, and a chuckle of sheer Belial joy rippled from his lips.

"Brother Mandy," he said, curling an affectionate arm round the little man's shoulders, "I always knew that you were an honest-to-goodness, dyed-in-the-wool buccaneer at heart!"

Livingstone's face dissolved into a relieved smile.

"I thought, gov'nor, as we'd had so much trouble, like that we was entitled——"

"And how!" grinned Norman Conquest. "Sweet William is pleased—Scotland Yard is pleased—and we've collared the opposition's nest egg. Tell me, serf—are *we* pleased?"

They looked happily at all that well-earned boodle on the table. Mandeville Livingstone saw piles of money; but the Gay Desperado saw only a lovely little elfin face.

